

“The Disease of Religion”
John 5:1-15
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Text Comment

We come in our morning studies in the gospel of John to chapter five and we are reading the first fifteen verses of John chapter five. This is the account of the third sign of the seven that John includes in his gospel -- the changing of the water into wine. We just finished the account of the healing of the official's son at the end of chapter four.

And now the third sign. We begin a new section of the gospel in chapters 5-7 which records the gradual shift in the sentiment of the Jews toward Jesus from curiosity and reservation and hesitation at the outset of the Lord's ministry to outright hostility and rejection and opposition by the end of this period some months, perhaps more than a year later. The point of contention, as the other Gospels confirm, was frequently the Sabbath day, as will be the case here. The Lord, who loved and kept the Sabbath day holy according to its true meaning and true demand, nevertheless did reject the rabbinical understanding of Sabbath-keeping. A legalistic practice that had developed in the generations before this that really had lost sight of the true meaning and the true blessing of the Lord's day.

- v.1 Now as I have said at the outset, John pins the chronology of the Lord's ministry on the several Jewish feasts that he mentions Jesus as having attended through the course of the ministry. Passover, a Spring feast, in 2:13; 6:4; and 11:55; Tabernacles, an Autumn feast, in 7:2; and Dedication, (what we know as Hanukkah), a winter feast, in 10:22. This feast mentioned in 5:1 is the only feast that is not specifically identified. We are not told whether it was Passover or Tabernacles or Pentecost or Dedication. But combining information from John and the synoptic Gospels, it appears that there was another Passover, and so another year, between the two Passovers mentioned in John 2:13 and John 6:4. So it is possible that this feast is likewise a Passover though it is not possible to say for sure.
- v.2 The site has been excavated now. There were actually two pools surrounded by four covered colonnades in the form of a trapezoid – if you remember your geometry a trapezoid is a plane figure in which only two of the lines are parallel not all four as in a rectangle. And there was also a fifth column as mentioned here -- a fifth colonnade which separated the two pools so you had colonnades on the outside of this pool, really a double pool configuration and then one down the middle separating the two. [Carson, 242]
- v.3 Now you will see that the verse numberings in the NIV skip from 3 to 5 , there is no verse 4, and you will find what was originally found in the KJV of verse 4 in the footnote in your margin. It is pretty clear now that what is in the NIV footnote originally was not in John's text but perhaps was a note a scribe placed in the margin of the biblical text. It is an explanation provided for the presence of the disabled at the pool and it is an elaboration of what we are told later in v. 7. The true text of John's gospel says nothing specifically about why the disabled happened to lie here next to this pool though it is implied why in verse seven. And that is, what no doubt, many thought. That an angel stirred the waters of the pool and that healing would be given to the first one who got into

the water after the waters were stirred. People were as superstitious in those days as almost they are today! I don't think they had psychic hotlines, they weren't that bad in the first century but they were superstitious none the less as people are today. The stirring of the water might have been caused by any number of things — a bubbling of a spring that fed the pool is one possibility or the refilling of the pools from a reservoir through pipes is another possibility.

- v.5 His affliction, according to v. 8, seems to have been some form of paralysis or lameness. Now, 38 years was, of course, the length of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness before she could enter the Promised Land. There is a debate among commentators as to whether John intends for us to make that connection — and so see the healing as a symbol of spiritual rebirth after rebellion —, we do know later on in the passage that this man was afflicted because of his sins -- or whether the fact that his illness had lasted 38 years is mentioned simply emphasizes how long this man had been afflicted and how long he had been unable to find a cure.
- v.6 Now, among all the invalids lying there, a large number John tells us, the Lord went to this one man, He didn't heal everyone, he went to this one man. So often in the Bible, the Lord takes the initiative and chooses the one whom he will save. Now the NIV's "learned", the word learned this about that man, is an interpretation. It could just as well be translated "knew", the Lord knew this about that man, and it would be the same kind of knowledge that the Lord had, say, about the woman at the well, that she had had five husbands and that the man she was living with at the time wasn't her husband (4:17). That would explain how Jesus knew that the man's affliction had been a punishment for his sin as we'll learn later in verse fourteen. In any case I want to continue to remind you this is not knowledge that he has because as God the Son he is omniscient. We encounter the Lord in his human nature in the gospels by and large almost exclusively (the transfiguration is the one remarkable exception to that rule). Many prophets have been given knowledge of things they could not otherwise know through the course of the Bible and this is a case of such knowledge.
- v.8 Just as the Lord creates the world with a word so he restores and heals this man simply by uttering a word. Now the command to take up the mat is not an incidental insignificant detail. As one commentator puts it, his carrying the mat proved that the man "was not staggering off in ambiguous health, but leaving with the bodily strength necessary to carry his mat!" [Carson, 244] Not like people who go to faith healing meetings and go in limping and come out trying desperately not to limp. This is a man who had been healed.
- v.11 "The man was not of the stuff of which heroes are made. He put the whole blame on the shoulders of the man who had healed him." [Morris, 306]
- v.13 They would, of course, all have gathered around him, they knew why he was there, they were in many cases sick or paralyzed or lame themselves. There would have been an extraordinary stir when they realized what had happened to this man it would [not] have been easy for the Lord to slip away.
- v.14 The sense of John's Greek "you are well again" is that the cure is permanent, lasting. No doubt many of the reported "cures" from the pool, like the "cures" of faith healers today,

they didn't last very long – they existed more in the mind than in the body. But not the Lord's cures.

“Stop sinning or something worse...” A statement very unwelcome in our day. It is certainly true that the Bible teaches that much suffering in the world is *not* the specific punishment for some sin. Think of Job. But that hardly means that no suffering is the specific punishment for sin. Surely there are a great many instances in the Bible in which punishment is precisely or suffering is precisely punishment for sin.

William Temple, in his suggestive work on John's Gospel, writes this on the Lord's remark. “That is the danger of escape from the result of sin. If we are not vigilant, we relapse into a repetition of the sin; and the next time the resulting impotence is greater and the process of cure is harder.” [*Readings*, 109] I have been a pastor for twenty-two years now and I have seen this over and over and over again. It is a principle of God's dealings with people and with his own people. When the Lord delivers us in some way from the consequences of our own sin, we are obliged to take special care not to fall back into that same sin. If we do, we may find the consequences worse and more intractable and inescapable than before.

- v.15 The man, one commentator describes him as an “unpleasant creature” [Morris, 307], turns the Lord in, as it were, to protect himself from the Jews. He didn't have to go and tell them who it was. It was already clear to him that the Jews were incensed by the breach of the Sabbath law, so clearly he is not simply wanting to give Jesus the credit for his healing; he is deflecting any conceivable blame that might attach to him later for his violation to someone else — the very man who healed him. Scoundrel!

For the first time in the Gospel of John, we have an incident revealing the fundamental opposition to Jesus on the part of the Jewish religious leadership. And we have here, as well, the evidence that it was a *religious* opposition. This is, of course, the bitter irony of the Gospel story, in both John and the Synoptic gospels -- Matthew, Mark and Luke -- it was the religious people, the devout people, the very people who should have welcomed the Lord Jesus with open arms and understood his mission, the people who should have thrilled at the knowledge that the messiah had come among them. The very people who claimed loyalty to the same Scriptures who had or which had prophesied his coming, these were the people who hated him, who rejected his mission and, who at the last, conspired in his murder.

Here are religious men who especially of all men should have rejoiced with all their hearts at the kindness Jesus had shown to this thirty-eight year old miserable man; should have marveled at God's power; should have wondered in humility what was happening among them. Who should have fallen at the Savior's feet to worship him, and, instead are quibbling about the fact that this man, paralyzed for thirty-eight years, and now walking like anyone else was violating their understanding of Sabbath sanctification.

The very least they might have done, given their mistaken view of the Sabbath day of the keeping of the fourth commandment, the very least would have been for them to say, “Dear brother, how wonderful is God's grace to you! We rejoice with you. We want to hear more of how you were healed. God has done a great thing in our midst today. And we rejoice with you in it. But, here, put down your mat while we rejoice in this healing so that you give no offense.” Then, their quibbling about the Sabbath we could take as simply an honest mistake. But here it is

clearly something more sinister, a religious zeal that masks a hatred of God, of God's grace and goodness. They care more about their rules, of course that is what these were, their own rules, there is nothing in the Bible about keeping the Sabbath day this way. They invented these rules themselves and that is why they loved them so. That is why they were so easily offended by the violation of them.

Make no bones about it theirs was a religious hatred and a religious opposition. But, then, what is new? The hatred of the Jews for Jesus, while the worst, is hardly the only example in the Bible of the corruption of the true faith into a genuine hatred for what is true and good. Most of the condemnation, have you noticed this, most of the condemnation the judgment, the attribution of killing error that we find in the Bible is not addressed to the unbelieving nations; it is not addressed to the practitioners of other religions. It is addressed to the church. Through most of the history of Israel, the largest part of the God's people embraced views that amounted to a betrayal of the covenant he had made with them. They hated, they rejected, sometimes they even murdered the prophets he sent among them to call them back to himself.

The Jews were hardly back in the Promised Land, after the Babylonian exile, before they began rejecting the Lord once more, so deeply fixed was this habit. Not that they ever thought that of themselves; not that they would ever have admitted it of themselves. Oh, no. They were the faithful ones; the prophets who condemned them were the trouble-makers.

And, so it was in Jesus' day. And so it has been ever since. The greatest enemy of Christianity in the world *has always been the Christian church*. It isn't the atheists or the Muslims, it is the Christians themselves, or at least a large number of people who call themselves Christians. The greatest burden the gospel has had to bear in the world has always been the multitudes of people who call themselves and think themselves Christians who have, in fact, betrayed the Lord with a kiss, rejected the teaching of the Bible and made a new religion for themselves and continued to call it Christianity.

Think of a few illustrations, just a few of the multitude of illustrations we might choose. The last great instance of Christian martyrdom in the West was that of the Scottish covenanters in the later 17th century. These were extraordinarily devout Presbyterians – lovers of Christ, of his church, of his Gospel, of his Word, to a genuinely impressive degree – and they were murdered, sometimes in the cruelest and most inhuman way, by Episcopalians, who were sure they were serving Christ by doing so.

A half-century later, when the Great Awakening broke over England, the chief opposition to this marvelous new work of salvation was the church herself, her priests and her bishops, who refused Wesley and Whitefield the right to preach in their parishes, who spoke against them, spread vicious rumors about them, sicced the law on them. Men who had the care of souls were the chief enemies of the salvation of souls. And there has scarcely been a time in the history of the church in the world when, to some extent and very often to a very great extent, the Christian religion in its outward form has been the chief enemy of the Christian religion in its true form.

And so it was in the days of Jesus himself. But, you and I may very well miss this point because, Bible-readers that we are, having grown up with a negative impression of the Pharisees as we have, we have far too one-sided a view of these men. We have an unreal view of them, we don't see how much they were members and leaders of the church. Pharisees no doubt made up a large part of this deputation that interrogated this man who had been healed. We think of Pharisees as

the Snidely-Whiplashes of first century Judaism, the type of men who would kick dogs, refuse to help little old ladies cross the street, and who would delight to foreclose on poor families. But, of course, they were nothing of the kind. The Pharisees were popular with the people because of their religious concern for their punctilious observing of the law of God which was the goal of all Jews. They were much more popular with the people than the Sadducees were who were wealthy and arrogant and distant. Women apparently especially admired the Pharisees and the masses looked to them for spiritual and religious leadership. They were kindly to the poor, they were the people's party, if you will.

What is more, they had a very high view of the Bible and its authority and inerrancy, they were champions of the doctrine of divine election – they were the Calvinists of their day – and they were separatists, like us, refusing to go along with or make peace with the liberals of their day, the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection of the dead, the existence of angels, and so on. They were also patriots of the first order. They refused to swear the oath to Herod, Rome's client king. And that made them still more heroic in the eyes of the people. The Pharisees, in fact, were the covenanters of their day! The Pharisees were much closer to the teaching and the world-view of Jesus than the Sadducees were, and you can remember passages in the Gospels where the Lord acknowledges their religious zeal and the seriousness with which they practiced their faith, even the accuracy of much of their teaching. "Do as they say, and not as they do," the Lord said to his disciples once concerning the Pharisees.

It is a great lesson and warning of spiritual life that people such as these – most of whom you would have found very impressive and attractive and pleasing people had you had the opportunity to meet them — have come down through history with such a sinister and evil reputation, as the arch-hypocrites!

But, as Pascal wisely observed, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious convictions." Or, as Brownlow North, the Scottish lay evangelist put it more bluntly, "There exists not on this earth a thing more offensive to God, or destructive to himself, than the honest, genuine belief of the natural heart of man." [*Rich Man and Lazarus*, 115] Most of the genuine evil in this world and the worst forms of that evil are performed by people, practiced by people who are very sincere.

So, what was the problem with the Pharisees? Why were they so blind to Jesus Christ? Well, it was the same old thing! Theirs was hardly a new religious mistake. It was very much the same as had been condemned often enough in Israel by the OT prophets. Indeed, the Lord directly links these Pharisees to their forefathers, who had persecuted the prophets precisely because the prophets had preached against them and condemned them in precisely the same way Jesus preached against the Pharisees and condemned them.

Theirs, as Paul would later put it, was a "form of godliness" but "denied its power" (2 Timothy 3:5). And, if you consult the gospels and Paul's criticism of first century Judaism, of which the Pharisees were the quintessential examples and representatives, you discover that where they went wrong was where men and women, even Christian men and women always go wrong – at the crucial point of the estimation of sin and grace.

True religion, according to the Bible, is the embrace of God's grace, his gift of salvation of which men and women are utterly unworthy, a gift of God's free love and mercy and generosity, and, so, by no means the achievement of a man or woman; a gift because no man *could* achieve

it, no woman can come close to meeting the requirements of God's holy judgment. And so the fundamental principles of true religion in the human heart are therefore humility -- we could not do it and so God did it for us; love -- we could not do it so God did for us; and faith -- we could not do it and so God did it for us.

But men lose sight of this. It is their natural instinct to lose sight of it. They begin to think differently about their relationship to God. Subtly, imperceptibly, they transform their salvation, their peace with God, their hope of his favor in the next life into a calculation of merit and reward. Suddenly, without really thinking about the change that has taken place they are thinking in terms not of God's doing for them but of *their* doing, *their* performing, *their* achieving, *their* obeying, *their* serving God as the basis of their peace with God and hope of heaven.

And, when they have done that, they have gone back to the position of every other religion in the world, and they have forsaken Christianity altogether in its uniqueness, its genuineness, whatever Christian vocabulary they may continue to use. Every religion except true, biblical Christianity teaches men to do certain things in order to obtain the favor of God. And the reason every religions teacher, every religion, every theological system teaches that is because *that* is the natural theology of the sinful human heart. It is what men will always think when left to themselves. In this age of computers we would say it is the default theology of the human heart. You always go back there. Whenever you get confused, whenever you stop thinking carefully, you are suddenly back to that theology.

In the case of the Pharisees, this shift took place over time, actually over generations through a gradual domestication of sin. We know that because that is where the Lord Jesus struck at their teaching and their religion. It is where Jesus found the cancer that was eating alive the devout of his day, destroying their religious life.

It is the pious, in a way, those who took seriously the importance of obeying God's law, who are always in special danger. They want to obey God's law; they revere God's law, they know they should and must obey it. But it is precisely that person who is inclined to denature and devalue sin. In his effort to keep the law suddenly he transforms the law to make it keep-able to make it something it is possible for him to keep. They begin to see sin in isolation, simply as one or another of the transgression of the 613 rules that the Jews purported to find in the Torah.

Sin's fundamental root and nature as rebellion against God, as a moral stain in the heart that pollutes everything we are and everything we do, is slowly forgotten. Everything now became a concern about sins instead of a concern about sin. And then it was a short step to the grading of sins--from the worst to the least. And then it became increasingly important not to commit the greater sins, less important not to commit the lesser sins. And once sin have been graded in that way, it becomes possible to think that there were many sins that one had never committed, murder or robbery, for example.

And suddenly now a man thinks sin is something he can control. Sin has been domesticated, it has been made innocuous by the twin ideas that we are able not to sin, in large segments and areas of our lives, keep it out of our lives and then by the other idea that we are able to do things that balance sin out. That was the Jewish idea of merit. It was believed both that sin could be controlled and that man had the power to replace its debit with his own merit. This is what Jesus was attacking in the Sermon on the Mount with the Pharisees when he says that hatred and lust in

the heart *are* murder and adultery. He says that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees you will in no wise see the kingdom of heaven.

Indeed it was that righteousness precisely that the Jews imagined that they were serving, that they were making possible by this elaborate casuistry that they developed throughout this period. A thousand and one regulations to help devout people know exactly how to keep from committing sins and exactly how to keep the law “That man possesses the ability to fulfill the commandments of God perfectly was so firmly believed by the rabbis, that they spoke in all seriousness of people who had kept the whole law from A to Z.” [Cranfield, *Mark*, at 10:20]

And so the rich young ruler could say to Jesus, with complete seriousness – and there were many such statements like this in the Jewish materials from the period – that he had kept all of the commandments from his youth. What he meant was that he had followed the outward regulations, very doable regulations, of the rabbis, the regulations that had been developed to promote an obedient life and he confused *that* with true obedience and true righteousness, which is always first and primarily an inward thing, love, commitment, purity, humility, loyalty to God and to man. And so Jesus asked the rich young ruler to do one thing: “go sell your money, give it to the poor, and come after me” and so proved to that man that far from keeping the commandments from his youth he hadn’t even begun to understand what the first commandment demanded of him. His money was his god. Unless your righteousness succeeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, unless your righteousness exceeds that of these morally religious, upright-pleasing, admirable and popular men you will never see the kingdom of heaven.

See, once this view of sin is accepted – as something that can be controlled – once this view of obedience is accepted – as something that can balance sin in God’s judgment of your life – the entire notion of God’s grace and salvation by grace falls away, it has to. We don’t need God’s gift of life; we can earn it for ourselves. So it was in Judaism, so it has been a hundred times over in the ages since, in the midst of Christianity itself. Salvation becomes predictable, an equation, a tit for a tat. That is the way most people think about salvation, including most people who sit in Christian churches on a Sunday. There is no room here for what Paul calls “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” There is no “amazing grace that saved a wretch like me.” God favors those who live well. Nothing too exciting or surprising or amazing about that. There were Jewish rabbis who had gone so far down this road that they taught that the reason Israel had been chosen by God to be his special people was that God knew that the Jews were the only ones who would and could keep all his commandments.

No wonder then that when Jesus came among them, the Pharisees were not inclined to receive and welcome him. He came to save them from their sins, but they had no living sense of a need for that. They wanted a political deliverer *precisely because they assumed they could provide their own spiritual deliverance*. They wanted victory over Rome, not sin and guilt, because they assumed they could achieve the latter without any visitation from heaven. Jesus came offering them what they already had! And he didn’t think much of the rules that they had developed to make it possible to accumulate merit with God and that infuriated them. He looked down on their religious system and you know how that irritates you, when someone looks down on your religious system, criticizes your doctrine.

All of this so important for us to take heed of to take warning from -- for the slope to the bottom of this hill is slippery indeed and vast multitudes have slid down it.

Think of the old fathers of the ministerial association to whom William Carey, the pioneer missionary in the early years of 1800's, first proposed the effort to reach the distant nations of the world with the gospel of Christ. "Young man, sit down! You are an enthusiast. When God pleases to converse with the heathen He'll do it without consulting you or me." [B. Miller, *William Carey*, 32] Give the man credit, like you have to give the Pharisees a lot of credit. He believed in the sovereignty of God. He knew that men would not be saved without the work and the moving of God. But, you see, he had lost touch with the idea, the fact that the line separating the righteous from the heathen did not lie anywhere on a map. It ran instead through human hearts. And it was detected in one way only, by a person's recognition that he was so sinful, so utterly condemned by the law and the holiness of God that he had no hope of salvation unless God, somehow should intervene, and in grace and mercy, give him the life he could never earn for himself. And someone who understands the gospel in those terms, who sees himself as the heathen among the heathen, and then as one to whom God has shown an immeasurable mercy, is going, for love's sake and for thanksgiving's sake, and for the sake of his Savior's name, to want to take that wonderful news of God's grace and Christ's sacrifice to as many people as he can.

Or take a recent criticism I read of a PCA minister who said that he and his wife would go out with a homosexual couple for the sake of making a gospel witness to them. The writer of this article was taking offense at what seemed to him to be a refusal to stand openly and unashamedly against sin: going out for an evening with a homosexual couple, as if you were showing some respect and regard, as if you were acknowledging their relationship. But is that not precisely what the Pharisees said about Jesus when he allowed a prostitute to kiss his feet and anoint them with perfume. "If he were a prophet, he would know who was touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner."

A man who says that does not see himself as a terrible and hopeless sinner, as worthy of God's wrath as any prostitute, as any homosexual, as any other sinner for whom we have a particular contempt in our day and our time. And he doesn't see salvation as something wonderful beyond words, the most unexpected thing – that a holy God should have had mercy upon me; this arrogant, this proud, this selfish, this utterly trivial human being I know myself to be when I'm honest with myself. That the Son of God should die for my sins and my salvation; that God should love someone so positively unlovely.

No, we never say this to ourselves, we have lived in the church too long, we know better, but our attitudes betray us. We are the Jewish Rabbi. Over and over and over again in our hearts and deep in our hearts we are the Jewish Rabbi. We think that God saved us because we are among few, the very few, who are really worth saving in this world! Look at that man – thirty-eight years paralyzed and now jumping up and down with glee! He doesn't even keep the Sabbath day! They couldn't hear what they were saying. They didn't realize what they were revealing about themselves. They had so completely lost touch with the grace and the goodness and the mercy of God. But they didn't have it and didn't know they didn't have it.

The principle of the Pharisee is in us all, lurking near the surface of our minds, at every moment of every day embedded somewhere in our attitudes all the time. It must be stood against, watched against, prayed against and torn out. And over and over again we have to be reminded, which is why the Bible does this times without number and then embrace again with our hearts the basic truths that we were dead in our transgressions and sins and God made us alive with him in Christ. We were ugly in our sins and God loved us nevertheless and lifted us up and gave us a hope and a life and an inheritance and a future not only that we positively did not deserve, or

come within a million miles of deserving, but that we would never ever have obtained had he not chosen to give it to us free for nothing and been willing to give it to us fully aware of what little we were going to do with this gift when he had put it in our hands.

The fact is, when the Lord healed that man on the Sabbath day, he did not break the law of God. The Sabbath law as God gave it in the ten commandments never prohibited acts of grace and mercy and healing such as the Lord performed. But commandments have to be twisted terribly when men begin to remake them in order to be able to keep them, because they think that by keeping them they will save themselves. We can talk about the Sabbath in some other time.

But, for now, the important thing to recognize is that it was a fundamental religious attitude that kept those Jewish religious leaders from rejoicing in the favor that God had bestowed upon that undeserving scoundrel of an invalid. It was a perverted view of religion that kept them from seeing in that poor man's deliverance a picture of their own. From seeing themselves in that man so paralyzed that he could not move, utterly dependent upon the mercy and grace of God, and then kept them from weeping with joy at the thought that God had been merciful to them, hopeless sinners, as hopeless as that man trying to get into the pool and then leaving Bethesda that day, their hearts full, their eyes watering, loving much because they knew they had been forgiven much.

Alas, it happens all the time. It is happening in hearts today. The amazing grace of God to undeserving sinners is receding to the back of the mind, soon to be forgotten altogether and not remembered even when the Bible is read and even when one comes in to church on a Sunday and in hymns God is thanked for the gift of his salvation.

You swear to the Lord right now in your heart. You swear to him I will not forget, O Lord. I will not forget your great love or my terrible hopelessness. I will not forget when the wicked slide away into eternal ruin, "there but for the grace of God, go I." And if there is no one else in all the world who remembers this, I will remember it. And because that grace is amazing as it is, I pledge, O Lord, to share it with others and to rejoice when others receive it, however different they may be from me so that I may prove to my dying day to you and to others and to my own so unreliable heart that, I, at least I, understand how unworthy I was of this great gift and how unspeakably kind and generous you were to give it to me.