

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #15
September 8, 2019

Sermon Summary #15

Deciphering the Mysteries of Healing John 4:46-5:17

Does the subject of divine healing ever confuse you? I'm almost embarrassed to ask that question, because everyone answers in the same way: Yes! And I'm not sure I trust those who say No. I agonize over the question of why one person is healed and another is not, why some healings are instantaneous and total while others are gradual and partial. Does it strike you as odd, as it does me, that notwithstanding a multitude of prayers a Christian suffers and dies while a non-Christian recovers and lives without the aid of so much as one prayer? Do you find it baffling, as I do, that on occasion those who sin the most suffer the least, and those who sin the least seem to suffer the most?

I'm not suggesting that this is the way it always is, but it happens with enough frequency that I continue to wonder about healing and the mysteries that surround it. I think our struggle is often due to the fact that we would prefer to put God in a straightjacket and reduce healing to a rigid formula. We want God to perform for us like a computer program: log in the correct data, type the correct keys, and he will always produce for us the desired results!

I confess that at times I want to pin God down and domesticate him. I want to identify some set of pre-arranged rules and bind him to always act in conformity with some spiritual formula that we can control. The problem is that our God is elusive and mysterious and utterly sovereign and does not subject himself to man-made formulas.

I don't mind telling you that few things irritate me more than people who profess to have all the answers for why God either does or does not heal someone. I wish it were as neat and tidy as some portray it to be. If only it were always the case that if you're not healed it's because you had too much sin and too little faith, or when you are healed it is because you had very little sin and a whole lot of faith.

That doesn't mean sin and faith play no role in whether or not God heals. They most certainly do. But all too often God doesn't seem to act in conformity with the pre-arranged rules that you and I put in place. He always remains mysterious and sovereign. His ways are not our ways.

If you have any doubt about that, just consider the two stories we've just read in John's gospel. Here we have, back-to-back, two incidents of healing that are as different as night is from day. The only thing they share in common is the presence and power of Jesus. So let's look at both stories and then circle back around to consider what they each tell us about divine healing.

The Official's Son (John 4:46-54)

This unnamed "official" lived in Capernaum, which was approximately 15-20 miles from Cana where Jesus had turned the water into wine. He was evidently a wealthy and powerful man, as indicated by the many "servants" (v. 51) who attended to his needs. Yet neither his rank nor riches exempted him and his family from the common sorrows and pains of mankind. The wealthy and influential have just as much need for Jesus as the poor and powerless.

He had probably been told that Jesus had been healing people and had arrived in Galilee. So he rushed to find him. He was your typical dad: he loved his child; he was brokenhearted and grieved as he stood by watching him die. The verb in v. 27 translated "asked" is rendered "begged" by the NIV. It actually suggests repeated, persistent action. This man was relentless in his pursuit of Jesus. This was no polite or casual inquiry but a passionate and emotionally intense request.

Our Lord's initial response sounds like a rebuke. Look at v. 48 – "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." The word "you" here is in the plural, indicating that Jesus is not so much addressing the man alone but the

entire crowd of people surrounding him who evidently were hankering for a miracle. In other words, Jesus uses the request of this man to rebuke how many people have reacted to his ministry. Their interest is motivated by their craving for a sign or a wonder.

He has in mind those who are sign-seekers or wonder-worshippers. These are people who don't love God for who he is in himself. They use God to satisfy their curiosity or their hankering after a spiritual trick. You say you believe, but your belief is not real belief that honors me. "We can call it *belief*, but it's not the kind that unites you to me as one who sees and treasures me as the Son of God full of grace and truth. In fact, it dishonors me" (Piper).

Now let's be careful. Jesus is not saying that signs and wonders are bad or that belief that is evoked by a miracle is something less than real faith. Consider a few other statements that Jesus will make:

"For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel" (John 5:20).

"But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me" (John 5:36).

"Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves" (John 14:11).

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so 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 20:30-31).

There is a world of difference between saying, on the one hand, "I refuse to believe unless I see a sign or a wonder" and, on the other, "I have seen a sign and a wonder and it helped lead me to believe." In the case of the former, the absence of a miracle is used as an excuse to justify one's unbelief. It is as if a person says, "I find nothing about Jesus that is intrinsically compelling, nothing that in itself makes him an object of admiration and awe, nothing that warrants my affection and praise. Perhaps if he performed some supernatural trick I *might* believe."

The latter of the two perspectives says: "I have been drawn to Jesus by the beauty of his personality and the authority of his words and the glory of his grace. There is simply no one who can compare with him. And then he bore witness to this by healing the sick and I marveled at his power and believed."

The point is that Jesus wants our faith to be characterized by dedication and unconditional commitment rather than merely by amazement alone. Faith inflamed solely by signs will burn only so long as the signs can be seen. Your faith must be in Jesus, not merely in the signs and wonders that point to him. Jesus is here warning us against what I call *super-supernaturalism*. This is when a person's zeal diminishes in the absence of the miraculous. Many people don't care much for the steady, humble, quiet daily rigors of Christian discipleship in the kingdom of God. So our Lord's rebuke here is of those who are filled with doubt and disillusionment when signs and wonders are not forthcoming. It's as if Jesus is saying, "I want your commitment to me to go deeper than that; I want it to be grounded in who I am and not merely what you see."

And before we move on, let me point out one massively important truth. In spite of our Lord's rebuke of the people, he proceeds to heal the official's son! Notwithstanding his rebuke of their demand for a miracle, he performs a miracle!

Healing at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15)

The next scene, in John 5, is a pathetic one. There is a multitude of sick people resting each day beneath the covered porch in hopes of being healed. But before I go any further, let me say something about the difficulties in the text itself.

If you're reading the KJV instead of the ESV or the NASB or the NIV, you may wonder why we didn't read what is in your Bible. Those of you reading the ESV with me will note that there is no verse 4. The text moves from v. 3 right

into v. 5. What happened to v. 4? The answer is that it most likely was not part of the original text written by John the Apostle. There are a few Greek manuscripts that include v. 4, and it reads as follows: “in these lay a multitude of invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed . . .

“waiting for the moving of the water, for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had.”

Evidently, something stirred the water periodically and the people superstitiously thought it caused healing (see v. 7). Verse 4 was inserted into the text later on to provide an explanation. We don’t know what caused the stirring of the waters. Perhaps it was a natural spring bubbling up intermittently. Perhaps water was piped into the pool from an external source. In any case, the people in that day thought it was an angel.

Of course, this isn’t to say that God couldn’t have used such means to bring healing to certain people. You may recall 2 Kings 5:10,14 where Naaman, the captain of the Aramean army had leprosy. He was told by Elijah to wash seven times in the Jordan River and he was healed!

In any case, Jesus selects one man from this multitude of those in need. He heals only him. Why? Surely Jesus saw the others. Surely he was aware of their pain and suffering. This is one of the mysteries of healing that we’ll address in more detail later in our study of John 5.

We read in v. 6 that Jesus “knew” he had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. How did he know this? The NIV translation says that Jesus “learned” this, suggesting that someone present supplied him with the information. I disagree. The text literally says he “knew” it, most likely because the Holy Spirit had revealed this to him.

Jesus then asks what many regard as a genuinely silly question: “***Do you want to be healed?***” (v. 6b). “Do I want to be healed? No, Jesus, I enjoyed being paralyzed. It’s a real blast to have someone carry me to this pool every day for thirty-eight years. I really take delight in lying here helpless as I watch healthy people walk by each day.”

Although it sounds odd to many at first hearing, healing sometimes may not happen because the sick *don't want* it to happen. Some people who suffer from a chronic affliction become accustomed to their illness and to the pattern of life it requires. Their *identity* is to a large extent wrapped up in their physical disability. I realize that sounds strange to those of us who enjoy robust health. Why would anyone prefer to stay sick? Who wouldn’t jump at the opportunity to be healed? But I’ve actually known a handful of folk who in a very real sense enjoy their dependence on others and the special attention it brings them. They are convinced that the only reason people take note of them and show them kindness and compassion is because of their affliction. If they were healed, they fear losing the love on which they’ve come to depend. Remaining sick is to their way of thinking a small price to pay to retain the kindness and involvement of those who otherwise would simply ignore them.

Then, of course, in some instances people don't want the responsibilities that would come with being healthy. To their way of thinking, it’s easier (and perhaps even more profitable) to remain the object of the generosity and good will of others than it would be to be healthy and thus expected to get a job and show up 9-5 on a daily basis. This is not a common phenomenon, but it does happen in a few cases.

The man’s response to our Lord’s question is that because of his condition he isn’t able to get to the water quickly enough. Someone always beats him to the punch, so to speak. The idea that healing actually came to the first person to step into the pool is not presented as the belief of either Jesus or John, but is the superstitious opinion of the man himself. Jesus has no need of the waters of this pool, but simply commands the man to be healed: “Get up, take up your bed and walk” (v. 8). Later on in John’s gospel, Jesus will make use of means: in chapter nine he spits on the ground and makes a mud ball that he then places on the eyes of a man who was blind. He instructs him to “go wash in the pool of Siloam” (John 9:6-7). Again, we see that Jesus is never bound to one method every time he heals. He may on one occasion make use of means while on another he simply speaks the word.

Note the response of the Jewish leaders in vv. 9-15. They are utterly devoid of concern or compassion for the man himself. There is no joy in their hearts that a man who was paralyzed for thirty-eight years is now walking! What

concerns them isn't that a supernatural work of God has occurred, bringing health to a crippled man. What concerns them is that one of their cherished religious traditions has been broken.

You can almost hear them discussing this among themselves:

"Look over there. Isn't that Fred, the cripple who has been lying by the pool of Bethesda for the past thirty-eight years?"

"Yeah, that's him."

"I can't believe my eyes. This is astounding. This is beyond amazing. My spiritual juices are flowing! My heart is pounding rapidly in my chest. I'm almost without breath!"

"Why? Is it because a completely paralyzed man is now completely healed?"

"Oh, no. It's because I can't believe he has the audacity to carry his bed on the Sabbath Day!"

The religious leaders couldn't care less that the power of God was at work in their midst. They couldn't care less that a man has been set free from a lifetime of misery and paralysis. They only care that one of their religious rules has been broken. In actual fact, the man had not broken any biblical law. It was Jewish tradition, as written in the Mishnah, that prohibited anyone from carrying any object from place to place on the Sabbath.

I suspect that all of us can remember instances in churches we've attended when the leaders were more concerned with religious protocol and their extra-biblical rules than they were with experiencing the presence and power of God.

"Pastor, something really great happened at the dance on Friday night following the football game. I was able to lead Sally Jones to the Lord. You may remember how rebellious and cynical she was, but now she is following Jesus!"

"You were where, at a dance? Don't you know that dancing is evil? Don't you know that our denomination prohibits dancing? I can't believe you would actually let people see you at such a carnal event."

Or,

"Pastor, I was talking with Mike the other day and there was a Bible on the table next to us. I think it was the English Standard Version. I opened it to John 3:16 and Mike actually prayed to receive Christ as his Lord and Savior! Isn't that incredible!"

"Excuse me. You didn't use the King James Version? I'm sorry, but I have doubts that Mike is truly saved. You ought to know by now that we only recognize the KJV as the true Word of God."

Or,

"Pastor, last Sunday, after church, I was mowing the grass when my next-door neighbor walked over and asked me about what you preached that morning. As I told him, he fell to his knees right there in the back yard and gave his life to Jesus!"

"Uh, you were doing *what* on Sunday? Mowing your grass? I think you need to come in and meet with the Elders of the church. This may be grounds for church discipline."

Well, enough of that. As outlandish as it may seem, those hypothetical scenarios are all too common, not only in the days of Jesus but today as well.

Lessons about Healing

There are several things we can learn about healing from these two stories.

(1) In chapter four, Jesus heals the young child without seeing him or touching him or even being in physical proximity to him. When the boy's father returned home, he heard from his servants that the boy had been healed at the very time Jesus had spoken. Jesus spoke the word of power in Cana and the healing took place in Capernaum. "Distance is no barrier to the power of God. Jesus could do works of healing without being physically present" (Leon Morris).

And he can do the same today. Don't ever fail to come and ask for the healing of someone else, thinking that because they aren't themselves present in this auditorium that God can't perform a miracle on their behalf.

On the other hand, in chapter five, Jesus is present. He sees the paralytic and speaks directly to him. The point is that God is free and sovereign and powerful enough to heal up close and personal or at a vast distance. There is no magic involved. No rules. Just God's compassion and sovereign will.

But don't think this minimizes the importance of laying hands on the sick and anointing them with oil and praying for them. My point isn't to undermine the value of one-on-one, hands-on healing prayer, but simply to magnify the sovereignty and freedom of God.

(2) In chapter four, the father of the boy takes the initiative. He seeks out Jesus. But in chapter five, it is Jesus who takes the initiative and seeks out the man (and him alone!). Whereas prayer is indescribably important, God may on occasion choose to heal someone independently of their asking for it. I've known cases where people were healed while listening to a sermon or singing a song of praise and adoration or while receiving the elements of the Lord's Supper, even though they hadn't been praying that God would heal them.

(3) Look at the role of faith in both stories. In chapter four, the official's faith is at first uninformed. There is no evidence that he believed Jesus was God incarnate, the Messiah of Israel. Yet he came to faith while talking to him. We read in v. 50 that "the man *believed* the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way." His child was healed before he believed that Jesus had accomplished a miracle. He also believed before he had seen or heard or had been given evidence that his son was healed. His child's faith or lack of it played no part in this story. Thus we see healing happening when the faith of the sick person plays no part whatsoever.

That doesn't mean faith isn't important. Of course it is. Numerous times in the other three gospels Jesus attributes the healing of someone to his/her faith. But as important as it may be, it isn't always necessary.

When we turn to chapter five, we see that faith is wholly absent! We read nothing remotely similar to what Jesus would in other places be heard saying, "Your faith has made you well." When this man was asked who healed him, he doesn't know. Far from trusting Jesus, he didn't even bother to learn his name!

Later, when questioned by the authorities, he starts out by blaming Jesus for the fact that he is carrying his bed on the Sabbath. When pressed by the authorities, he squeals on Jesus: "That guy who healed me, he's the one who told me to carry my bed."

(4) In chapter four, the issue of sin is absent. It plays no part. There is no indication that the official's son is sick and near death because he refused to eat the squash his mother put on his plate for dinner. If anything, I think God would have rewarded him for that! Nothing is said to suggest the young boy refused to clean up his room before coming to breakfast. We don't know why he was near death.

But in chapter five we have a different story. Farther down, in v. 14, we read this:

"Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you'" (John 5:14).

This suggests that the paralysis from which he has been healed was itself the result of some recurrent pattern of sin. Some argue that what Jesus is saying is, "Don't *start* sinning and thereby incur something even worse than physical paralysis." Others say it means, "*Cease and desist* from your pattern of sinning lest something even worse befall you." In either case, the something "worse" that would befall him if he persists in unrepentant sin is most likely eternal

death. After all, what could be worse than thirty-eight years of physical paralysis? It seems the only answer is: eternal separation from God.

Later in John 5:28–29, Jesus says, “An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.” Thus what I think Jesus is saying to this man is, “I have healed your body so that you may be holy, to motivate you to stop your pattern of unrepentant sin. When the day of judgment comes, I pray that you may rise “to the resurrection of life.”

What we need to remember, however, is that not all sickness is the result of some specific sin. It is true that had Adam not sinned in the Garden, there would be no sickness at all. But that is not the same thing as saying that if anyone is ever sick or afflicted it is because of some particular sin they have committed.

We know from John 9:3 that not all sickness is the result of some sin. Nevertheless, some sickness can be. I believe this is what James is telling us in chapter five of his epistle. There he says of the sick man who has called for the Elders to pray for him, “*if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven*” (James 5:15b). I think James is saying that if this man’s sickness is the result of his sin, the fact that God heals him physically is the indication that he has also forgiven him spiritually. In any case, avoid saying that sickness is *always* the result of sinning or that sickness is *never* the result of sinning.

(5) Finally, in chapter four the miracle leads to the salvation of others. We are told in v. 53 that when the official learned that his child had been healed at the very moment when Jesus spoke the word, “he himself believed, and all his household” (John 4:53). We have no way of knowing how much about Jesus this man and his household may have known prior to this event. But John makes it quite clear that it was in the aftermath of this miracle that they all came to saving faith. Once again, we see the beauty of what is known as “power evangelism”!

Then there is the situation in chapter five. There is no indication that anyone came to saving faith in Jesus because of this incredible miracle. The religious leaders certainly didn’t. In fact, they intensified their persecution of Jesus because what he did, he did on the Sabbath! And nothing is said to suggest that the man who was healed came to faith in Christ.

Conclusion

That Jesus is compassionate and caring is clear from these stories. He cares about the sick and the hurting. But he is also sovereign. Neither he nor his heavenly Father can be tamed or put on a leash by our rules or formulas or religious incantations. What he does, he does for his own mysterious reasons. What he does *not* do is likewise designed to serve his purposes. This is seen in the fact that “*a multitude of invalids*” (John 5:3) were present, all equally in need of healing, but Jesus healed one man, and one man only, and as we’ve seen, the man he healed wasn’t a particularly nice person. Did Jesus not see the others? Of course he did. Could he have spoken the word like he did for the official’s son and all of them have been instantly and fully healed? Yes, he could have. Why, then, didn’t he?

The only answer given is later in this chapter, John 5:19 – “So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.’” For reasons that are not stated, the Father was only healing one man that day. That is why Jesus healed only one man that day. Needless to say, this simply pushes the question back one step, but without providing us with an answer. Question: why didn’t Jesus heal them all? Answer: because the Father wasn’t healing them all. Question: why wouldn’t the Father have healed them all? Answer: we don’t know!

What, then, is our response to this? There is only one way to respond: we must continue to pray for the sick; we must continue to bring one another to the throne of grace; we must continue to cry out to God for his power and never back down or grow weary or allow our hearts to be crippled by cynicism or doubt when God chooses not to do what we ask at the time we ask it. We must continue to do what James commands in his epistle:

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (James 5:16).