



January 7-8, 2023

Ice Breaker Questions

- In this week's text Jesus clashes with the Pharisees regarding how they should view the Sabbath.
 - Did you have rules or family traditions centered around 'sabbath keeping' as you were growing up? If so, what were they?
 - What practices, if any, do you have in your own life to rest from your work?

Understand Their Story

In John 5:1-15, Jesus heals an invalid on the Sabbath, which causes controversy. Read the text together and reflect on the characters and the plot line of this story.

1. The Plot Line(s) of the Story

- a. Within this one story, there are 3 mini-stories or plot-lines, which each have their own setting and conflict. Where does each story stop and start? What is the setting and conflict of each story?
 - i. Story #1 - John 5:1-9a. Setting: In Jerusalem, beside the pool called Bethesda, one man is picked out of a 'multitude of invalids'. Conflict: The *sick man* has been an invalid for 38 years. Did he want to be healed? Resolution: Jesus heals him, he takes up his bed.
 - ii. Story #2 - John 5:9b-13. Setting: Location is uncertain, but John now identifies the day on which this all takes place - the Sabbath. Conflict: The *man who had been healed* is acting 'unlawful' by carrying his bed, and doesn't know whom he can 'blame' for his actions because he doesn't know who healed him.
 - iii. Story #3 - John 5:14-15. Setting: the temple. Conflict: Jesus finds *the man*, celebrates his healing and exhorts him to sin no more. In response, the man reports Jesus to the authorities!

2. The Characters in the Story

- a. The invalid
 - i. What different terms are used to describe this person as you read through the story?
 1. Story #1 - an invalid (v 5), the sick man (v 7)
 2. Story #2 - the man who had been healed (v 10, v 13)
 3. Story #3 - the man (v 15)
 - ii. What does each descriptor draw the reader's attention to?
 1. Story 1 - the terms draw attention to his presenting problem - he is an invalid
 2. Story 2 - the terms draw attention to what "the Jews" should have been noticing - this man was healed! Instead, they are noticing that he is carrying his bed!

3. Story 3 - the man, now healed, is simply referred to as 'the man' - in the same boat as all people who need to be saved from their sins so that nothing worse happens to them (see Day 5 of the devotional for more explanations on this).
- iii. How do you think John wants us (his readers) to think about this character? What clues in the text give you this impression?
 1. In the first story, he seems to be short sighted & pre-occupied with his own problems. When Jesus asks if he wants to be healed, he doesn't answer, or ask Jesus to heal him, he simply complains / explains that he has no one to help him enter the pool to be healed. He sees the pool, not Jesus, as the solution.
 2. In the 2nd and 3rd stories, he seems to be intent on self-preservation. When he is questioned, he tries to shift the blame onto Jesus. When he finds out who Jesus is, he reports him.
 - b. Jesus
 - i. As John writes this account, what do you think he wants us (his readers) to notice about the way that Jesus engages with people? *Below are my answers, there may be others!*
 1. Jesus chooses to heal some people (for his own particular reasons), but doesn't necessarily heal everyone (there was a multitude of people at the pool).
 2. Jesus asks questions to reveal their hearts and motives: Do you want to be healed? And then he heals some people regardless of whether or not they provide the 'right answer'.
 3. Jesus often withdraws when the religious authorities appear (v 13)! This has already happened once in John's gospel (John 4:1-3) and will happen again. Watch for it!
 4. Jesus approaches people with grace and exhorts them not to sin even if they don't necessarily deserve his attention (v 14-15)
 - c. The Jews¹
 - i. How are these individuals characterized by John?
 1. People who miss the forest for the trees. They don't notice, acknowledge, or ask questions about the man's healing (he has been an invalid for 38 years!), but are concerned about him taking up his bed on the Sabbath.

Connect to His Story.

3. This is the first of many clashes in John's gospel between Jesus and "the Jews" about the Sabbath. Since this topic will come up repeatedly, read the following texts to understand the Sabbath law, and how different prophets and leaders applied the Sabbath law. As you read each, discuss what they teach about the reason for the Sabbath. What do you find surprising or interesting about each text?
 - a. Exodus 20:8-11 - *Reasons for the Sabbath - rest for adults, their sons / daughters / servants / livestock and foreigners. Surprising & interesting - God cares about servants & animals & people who don't follow his law (foreigners) too! Rest is good & necessary for ALL people & animals, even if they don't acknowledge God. We are commanded to rest because God rested.*
 - b. Jeremiah 17:19-27 - *The concern here seems to be that people are trading goods here - bringing burdens in & out of the gates of Jerusalem (verse 21) and in and out of their homes (verse 22). Instead - they should be bringing burnt offerings in and out of the house of the Lord (verse 26). God has warned them about this in the past (verse 23). If they listen to the warning, Jerusalem will be inhabited forever (verse 25). Spoiler alert: they didn't listen and Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians later in Jeremiah's time.*

¹ Note: in John's gospel "the Jews" generally refers to Jewish leaders or Jesus' opponents; this term is not used to describe the general populace. When John wants to talk about them, he'll use the terms "the crowd" or "the people."

- c. Nehemiah 13:15-22 - Nehemiah takes place after Jerusalem has been destroyed and rebuilt - he is warning people NOT to do what they did before on the Sabbath (in Jeremiah's day / Jeremiah's warning above) - because this & many other things lead to God's judgment. They are not to trade / sell wares / process foods

Apply to Our Story

In John 5:1-15, John introduces us to a person who is physically healed by Jesus but is likely not spiritually saved. How does this story challenge you, personally, today?

- Do you know people who have cried out to God in distress, and have had their prayers 'answered' (meaning that their external circumstances have changed for the better)², but have never actually followed Jesus? If so, what would you conclude about this person? How should you pray for him / her?
- I (Kristal) have had people tell me recently that they are planning to stop coming to church or following Jesus because he hasn't changed their circumstances. They say things like, "It's just not working for me?" As you reflect on this story from John 5, what would you say to a person who says this? What kind of questions could you ask them? *Ideas:*
 - What do you think God needs to do for you for it to feel "worth it" to follow Jesus?
 - If God solved this problem for you, do you think that's the only problem you have or do you think there is deeper work that he would need to do in your life?
 - What do you know about what God has already done for you? Do you value the way he HAS demonstrated his love for you (see 1 John 4:9-10, Romans 5:6-11) or is this act of his love not seem particularly important or relevant for you?
 - *Note: these 'answers' are simply sample questions we could ask to put a 'rock in someone's shoe' and cause them to think about what they are really saying if they are thinking about turning their back on Jesus or the church.*

Prayer

- *Pray in Adoration: If you are a Christian, Jesus has saved you from our sins! Nothing worse can happen to you!*
- *Pray in Confession: Are you grateful for all the ways that Jesus has met you and has 'saved' you even if everything in life isn't happening according to your hopes and dreams.*
- *Pray in Supplication: Ask God to help you, and others, see your greatest need: being saved from sin.*

God's work and our Work

How All of Life Connects to the Gospel - in John 5:1-15

The Theology of Work commentary on John 5 provides the following reflection on this passage:

"The healing of the man at the pool of [Bethesda] brings to the surface a [familiar] controversy... Jesus' penchant for healing on the Sabbath. If the controversy is familiar, however, Jesus' self-defense takes a slightly different angle. His lengthy argument is crisply summarized in John 5:17, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." The principle is clear. God keeps the creation going even on the Sabbath, and therefore Jesus, who shares the divine identity, is permitted to do the same...

...There is no hint here that Jesus is merely widening the list of activities permitted on the Sabbath. Instead, let us apply the theme we see running through John—work that maintains and redeems the creation (material or spiritual) and contributes to closer relationships with God and people is appropriate

² We know that God "answers" prayer in many ways: yes, no, or wait. Many people, however, only think that God has answered their prayers if their circumstances change for the better; if the answer is in line with what they asked for.

for the Sabbath. Whether any particular work fulfills this description must be discerned by the person(s) involved.”

The same commentary provides the following reflections on a Sabbath controversy in Mark 2:23-28:

“...the Sabbath affords opportunities to exercise compassion and love... Isaiah 58 links the Sabbath with compassion and social justice in the service of God, culminating with a description of God’s blessing on those who will “call the Sabbath a delight” (Isaiah 58:13-14). The juxtaposition of compassion, justice, and Sabbath suggests that the Sabbath is most fully used as a day of worship by the demonstration of compassion and justice.

- What do you think about the argument made by these authors? What is the benefit of seeing the Sabbath as a day for exercising compassion and love? Do you think there is a potential ‘dark side’ to this idea? What impulses would we need to keep in check or balance if we approach Sabbath this way?
 - This week’s “Our work and God’s work” section is designed simply to get people thinking about the Sabbath. I’m happy for them to push back or agree with some parts of this argument and disagree with others.
 - The benefit of setting Sabbath as a day for exercising compassion and love: reframes our ideas of the Sabbath - we can get selfish about rest / think of our days ‘off’ (whether they are Sunday or another day) as me-time / family time and not think about how we can also reflect God’s heart for people on those days.
 - The potential ‘dark side: we do need actual physical and emotional rest, and if we are pouring ourselves out for others continually without any opportunities to be refreshed, we can get burned out doing endless actions of compassion & justice.
 - What impulses would we need to keep in check: People pleasing / Lack of boundaries on one side, and selfishness / rigid boundaries on the other. Also - legalism! If we set our own rules about what is acceptable on the Sabbath (and judge people based on our rules), we are falling into the trap of the Pharisees.