



January 7-8, 2023

Ice Breaker Questions

- In this week's text Jesus clashes with the Pharisees regarding how they 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?

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?
- ii. What does each descriptor draw the reader's attention to?
- iii. How do you think John wants us (his readers) to think about this character? What clues in the text give you this impression?

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?

c. The Jews¹

- i. How are these individuals characterized by John?

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
 - b. Jeremiah 17:19-27
 - c. Nehemiah 13:15-22

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."

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?

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 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?

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.