

The Uncomfortable Jesus

John 5:1-18

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on April 29, 2012

Introduction

- ❖ This might sound strange but I can understand those who outright reject Christianity and want nothing to do with Jesus. I don't agree with them, but I understand where they're coming from.
 - **But what I can't seem to understand are those who reject Christianity but still want to salvage Jesus.** They don't believe any of the claims that Christians make about him, like being the Son of God, dying and rising again, offering forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life. They reject all that, but they still want to honor Jesus as a great man, a great moral teacher, in the likes of Socrates, Buddha, or Gandhi.

- ❖ But if you say Jesus is just a great moral teacher, that tells me you have yet to consider what Jesus really taught, especially about his own identity. **Any mere mortal who made the kind of claims Jesus made about himself would never be considered a great moral teacher.** Yes, he made a lot of pithy statements and told memorable stories like other teachers. Yet, unlike Socrates, Buddha, or Gandhi, Jesus went so far as to actually claim to be God.

- ❖ In this morning's passage, we encounter the first of Jesus' many claims in the Gospel of John where he unequivocally equates himself with God. In fact, the point in each of Jesus' seven signs and seven "*I Am*" statements (which we'll cover in this series) is to reveal this fact, that he is the Son of God (1:1; 20:31).
 - And this is not just a conclusion drawn by his devoted followers. Even his enemies perceived his claim to be God. Look at 5:18, "*This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*"

- ❖ C.S. Lewis wrote in his most famous book, *Mere Christianity*, that if we consider the full body of Jesus' teaching including the claims he made about himself, then we are left with only three options when trying to form an opinion of him.
 - Jesus is either a **Lunatic**, a crazy man who really thought he was God. Or Jesus was a **Liar**, a con man who convinced a lot of followers he was God. Or you take Jesus at his word and believe he is the **Lord**.

- ❖ **Bottom line, you can't get away with saying that Jesus is just a great moral teacher.** He's far more comfortable that way. This way he offers some good advice, but he won't impose himself on you. But if you take what he says seriously, then he doesn't leave us that option. The man claimed to be the bodily incarnation of God himself! He's either crazy, a con man, or he's telling the truth.
 - But if he is the Lord, then you shouldn't expect Jesus to be comfortable. If you encountered the God of the Universe, do you really think your life will remain as status quo? If you accept the Lord Almighty into your life, do you really expect nothing to change? Nothing to be threatened? Nothing to be thrown out?

- ❖ This passage in John 5 will really challenges our view of Jesus. **Even Christians can fall into a kind of thinking where we admire Jesus as Teacher but fail to see the full implication of Jesus as Lord.** We can grow so comfortable with him that we fail to see how provocative, how controversial it is for a man, like Jesus, to claim to be God.
 - Let me walk us through this episode by breaking it down into three sections. We'll consider 1) the comfortable cripple, 2) the comfortable religious, and 3) the comfortable Christian, and we'll consider how Jesus challenges each.

The Comfortable Cripple

- ❖ Our passage begins with a narration of Jesus' journey from Galilee back to Jerusalem to celebrate another feast of the Jews. In v2, f Jesus visits a public pool by the "*Sheep Gate*", which is an opening in the northern wall of the old city, directly north of the temple grounds.
 - The pool was called Bethesda, which means "house of mercy". It was believed to have been used for washing sheep before taking them into the temple for sacrifice (hence the name of the gate). But the pool was also a place where the sick would lay around in hope of healing.
 - So when you hear "pool" don't imagine anything picturesque. Imagine dirty, smelly livestock being scrubbed down and a multitude of dirty, smelly sick people laying around. Obviously this was not an area of town visited by the upper class or those concerned with ritual purity. But here we see Jesus.
- ❖ Now in your Bibles you're probably missing v4. You might have a footnotes that says the verse was not found the earliest and most reliable manuscripts, so it should not be considered part of God-breathed Scripture.
 - But it mentions how, on occasion, an angel of the Lord would stir the waters of the pool and the first to step in would be healed of his/her disease. So even though the verse is not inspired, in light of v7, we know that it clearly reflected a popular belief.
- ❖ Now the occasional disturbances in the water can be explained by the fact that the pool was fed by underground springs. And according to ancient testimony, the water was said to be reddish in color, suggesting a high mineral content (iron salts). So just as hot springs attract visitors today with supposed healing powers, this pool attracted the sick for the same reason.
- ❖ In v5 we see Jesus approaching a man who was an invalid for thirty-eight years, which was an extraordinarily long time since the average life span for men in those days barely exceeded forty. The long length is meant to emphasize the hopelessness of this man's condition and the extraordinary nature of the miracle Jesus is about to do.
 - Now it's often noted that, unlike other episodes of Jesus healing the sick, this healing was unsolicited. The man wasn't asking Jesus for help. It was Jesus who approached him. This is a small detail, but it'll help explain the man's overall response.
- ❖ Consider what Jesus asks him in v6. "*Do you want to be healed?*" At first, this appears to be a silly question. Of course he wants to be healed. But notice how he replies in v7. Instead of

crying out, “Yes, please!”, he gives a excuse for why he’s been in this condition for so long. “*No one has the heart to help me. Everyone is so selfish. They rush headlong into the pool without considering poor me.*”

- You might think I’m being rough on the man, but it fits the way he’s portrayed in the rest of the passage, which is rather negative. **D.A. Carson** describes v7 as “*the crotchety grumblings of an old and not very perceptive man who things he is answering a stupid question.*” All this to say that there is an indication that this man, deep down, doesn’t really want to be healed.

- ❖ *Why would that be?* As one commentator points out, “*An eastern beggar often loses a good living by being cured of his disease.*” (J. A. Findlay) **In other words, a cure has huge implications, especially when the problem has been so long-standing that a whole way of life has been built up around it.** As bad as our situation may be, at least we’re familiar with it. At least we know what to expect.
 - But a cure, a healing, a life transformation will force us to face the unexpected. **In a very strange way, we are often more comfortable with our present misery than taking the necessary steps to see real healing and transformation in our lives.**

- ❖ I was really taken aback when I was ministering to homeless guys on the street who would tell me they knew the shelters were available. They knew a warm meal was available, a real mattress was available, a roof over their head was available. But they chose to refuse such help because they were more comfortable with their present misery than with the changes required of them if they actually accepted help.

- ❖ In the same way, **a young man knows Jesus offers to heal his addiction to pornography**, a source of constant guilt and misery, but does he *really want* to be transformed into a man of purity? On one hand, of course he wants it, but on the other, he dreads the idea because he knows the implication – the loss of secret pleasures that he’s grown so accustomed to.
 - **A couple knows Jesus can heal their marital strife**, but do they really want it? Or have them grown accustomed to the independence and distance between them? Ask if they want a healthier marriage, and of course, they’d say “Yes”. Yet on the other hand, they dread the idea knowing it’ll bring so many changes into their relationship.
 - **This just goes to show the sinfulness of sin and the way it pits our minds and our hearts against each other.** In our minds we know we need to be healed, but in our hearts we’re not sure if we really want it.

- ❖ So here in v7 we have this comfortable cripple, who is comfortable with the whole way of life that he has built up around his disease. But now this Jesus is threatening to knock down that way of life with a cure. What an uncomfortable thought!
 - And mercifully, Jesus doesn’t wait for a yes or no. Look at v8. In his sovereign grace, he heals this man with just his voice. “*Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.*” (vv8-9a)

- ❖ This cripple’s life as he knew it – for the last 38 years – will completely change. No longer can he justify a sedentary lifestyle living off the support of others. He would now be expected to work and contribute to society like everyone else.
 - **A cure has its implications. *But was this man ready for them?*** We’ll come back to him in the story, but starting in v10 John shifts the focus onto another group of characters and their reaction to this sign.

The Comfortable Religious

- ❖ I describe them as the comfortable religious. In v10 they’re called “*the Jews*”. That is a label John uses, not to generalize every Jewish person, but to address the Jewish religious leaders, and those under their influence, who opposed Jesus in those days.
 - Word quickly reaches them that a known cripple of 38 years is out and about walking around the temple grounds carrying his bedroll! Crowds were surrounding him, blown away by this miraculous sign.
 - *But how do these religious leaders respond?* Well notice at the end of v9 John sets up the tension with this, “*Now that day was the Sabbath.*”
- ❖ So read on in v10. “*So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.”* Don’t miss the plain irony here that these religious leaders are completely overlooking the fact that a cripple has been miraculously healed and instead they’re flipping out that he’s breaking one of their rules.
- ❖ ***But was the man actually breaking the Sabbath by carrying his bedroll?*** The Fourth Commandment prohibits doing any work on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8-11), but then it depends on how you define ‘work’. A natural reading would refer to your vocation, your employment. So the Law commands you to rest from your vocational labor one day out of seven.
 - But the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were not comfortable with a vague definitions, so they came up with a list of 39 classifications of work, and one type of “work” was taking or carrying anything from one domain to another (Mishnah, Shabbat 7.2). So according to their rules, this man is violating the Sabbath and not keeping it holy.
- ❖ Well the man immediately tries to shift the blame. He says, “*The man who healed me, that man said to me, “Take up your bed, and walk”*” It’s not my fault. I didn’t ask for it. This man healed me, and I’m just following his instructions.
 - So the religious leaders want to know who is this man who **1)** not only instructed someone to break the Sabbath but **2)** is a Sabbath-breaker himself by performing this healing on a day he should be resting (cf. Lk. 13:14).
- ❖ In v13, the man couldn’t say because he didn’t know who healed him, which means he didn’t even think to ask Jesus his name. And when he does find out, he goes straight to the Jews to rat out Jesus (v15). Again, this man is not being portrayed in a positive light.

- ❖ Notice in v14 what Jesus says to him when he finds him at the temple later that day, “*See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.*” Jesus appears to be connecting this man’s disease with a certain pattern of sin in his life. Now there are other places in Scripture that confirm this correlation.
 - But there are also many passages that teach the contrary – that you can’t always draw a straight line of cause-and-effect between a sin and an illness. John 9 and Jesus’ healing of a man born blind would be one of the best examples, which we’ll look at in a few weeks.

- ❖ But in this case, this man’s crippled state for the last 38 years is clearly being connected with a pattern of sin. We don’t know what exactly. All we know is Jesus commands this man to, “*Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.*” **The implication is the “bad thing” that already happened to him was caused by the sin that he must not repeat or else something “worse” will happen.** That something worse points to future judgment (cf. 5:29).
 - All of this is indicative of his overall attitude and the state of his heart. He’s not like the one healed leper who came back to worship at Jesus’ feet. He’s like the other nine who never returned (Lk. 17:11-19).

- ❖ Now v16 tells us that it was the fact that Jesus healed on the Sabbath is really what set off the religious authorities. This same issue over keeping the Sabbath pops up elsewhere in the other Gospels, and in those instances Jesus responds by either demonstrating their misunderstanding of Scripture *or* the inconsistency in their practice *or* their lack of mercy. And each time he gets their blood boiling.
 - But in our passage, Jesus offers an explanation for his actions that tops them all and completely infuriates them to the point they want him dead.

- ❖ Look at v17. “*But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now and I am working.”* In just these few words, **Jesus’ enemies clearly perceive that he is making a statement about his unique relationship with the God of all creation.**
 - It’ll make more sense if I explained a little background regarding a theological problem that rabbis had to resolve in Jesus’ day. As Genesis 2:2-3 clearly state God rested from his work in creation on the Sabbath.

- ❖ But a theological question was raised: **We’re commanded to rest on the Sabbath, but does God rest as well?** Because if he does, then who upholds the universe while he’s resting?
 - The Jews had such a high view of God’s providential activity that they believed the entire universe is held together and maintained by his active power (cf. Col. 1:17).

- ❖ Therefore, God must be continually working, even on the Sabbath, otherwise his providence over all creation would be suspended on a weekly basis. **So they concluded that God is the only being in the universe who can continue working on the Sabbath without actually breaking it.**

- ❖ So think about it: Jesus could have easily responded by quoting the Fourth Commandment and proving that this man was not breaking the Law of God but simply the traditions of men. But instead of that route, **Jesus uses this occasion to drop a theological bomb revealing his true identity.** *“My Father is working until now and I am working.”*
 - In other words, you and I agree that God is *“working until now”* even on the Sabbath. Well he’s my Father. I am his Son, and that’s why I am working even on the Sabbath.

- ❖ *Do you see what he’s doing? **Jesus is putting his work of giving life to this cripple on par with God’s work in giving and sustaining life to all.*** And if God is above the Sabbath, then so is Jesus *because Jesus is God!* And so we read in v18, *“This is why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”*

- ❖ It was common among the Jews to speak of God as “our Father” but no one dared speak in such personal terms as to call him “my Father”. But Jesus does. In chapter 10:30 he goes so far as to say, *“I and the Father are one.”* And immediately his opponents pick up rocks to stone him. And what’s their reason? *“Because you, being a man, make yourself God.”* (10:33)

- ❖ **These Jews had built a whole life around their empty religion.** Their lives revolved around self-righteous rules and empty traditions, and their entire experience of God was rooted in their ability to keep them and enforce them on others.
 - **But suddenly they encounter a man who doesn’t just claim to speak for God but to be God, who challenges their comfortable religiosity.** His basic message is they’re missing the point. Anyone with an ounce of compassion would have at least been glad for this man whose was healed. **It must take a hyper-religiosity to make a heart so cold and calloused that all you care about is he broke one of your rules.**
 - They’ve lost sight of true religion and settled for empty religion. It’s no surprise they get uncomfortable with Jesus. In fact they get furious.

- ❖ **Friends, Jesus is still confronting comfortably religious people today.** He comes along with his signs and reveals himself to be the Christ, the Son of God, God in the flesh. And out of his divine authority, he exposes the emptiness of their religion.
 - **He demands a heart of compassion and deeds of mercy.** He says that true religion that God the Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress (Jas. 1:27) – to extend love and care for the least in society.

- ❖ If that’s the case, then religion is no longer comfortable. This means I’ll have to get my hands dirty. I’ll have to wash a few feet. I’ll have to touch the untouchable and love the unloveable. I’ll have to serve and not just be served.
 - That’s not comfortable at all. Do you see why a lot of religious people prefer to get rid of Jesus and keep their empty religion? ***Why would I want to follow an uncomfortable Jesus into uncomfortable service for the good of those who make me uncomfortable?*** The religious authorities made their choice. We have to make ours.

The Comfortable Christian

- ❖ Let me conclude by bringing this home for us. **I want to dispel any notion that you and I can live as comfortable Christians if we really take Jesus' signs seriously** – if we believe that he is the Christ, the Son of God, and not only that but equal with God. “*The Word was with God and the Word was God*” (Jn. 1:1).
- ❖ Let's face it, **Jesus would be far more comfortable – and the Christian life also – if he didn't perform these miraculous signs and make statements like he does in v17**. If Jesus was just a carpenter from Nazareth, just an impressive miracle-worker, if he was just a good teacher who taught some good principles, then we could treat him like any other ancient philosopher and pick and choose what you accept and what you reject – what you'll follow and what you'll ignore.
 - If this command/verse fits comfortably with my lifestyle, then I'll embrace it. But if it challenges my moral outlook, then I'll chalk it up as an antiquated belief of an first-century Galilean teacher. A belief a modern person like myself can simply ignore.
- ❖ But Jesus doesn't leave us with that option. **If he really made these claims of deity, then you can't treat him like other teachers**. Either you're reading the words of a crazy man, a con man, or God himself.
 - And if you rule out Jesus as a lunatic or a liar, then you're left with Jesus as Lord, but if the words of Jesus are the words of God himself, then you don't have the comfort of picking and choosing what you want to believe.
 - You either receive Jesus fully or reject him completely. **You can't have Jesus as Good Teacher (as Moral Guide) and not Jesus as Almighty Lord**. There is no option for a comfortable Jesus to lead us in a comfortable Christianity.
- ❖ No, the Jesus of Christianity, of true religion, commands us to repent of self-righteous empty religion, to turn to him in faith and humble submission, so that he may turn you out among the uncomfortably needy with a heart of compassion and deeds of mercy.
- ❖ Let me end with a word to those of you who are not Christians but are searching. Honestly ask yourself, “*Do I really want to be saved?*” Yes, the Gospel says that Jesus offers the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life, which he secured through his life, death, and resurrection, to all who trust in him. Jesus stands ready to save you.
 - *But are you ready to be saved? Are you ready for all the implications?* Life as you've known it will completely change. Yes, that is an uncomfortable thought.