

3. Jesus instructed the healed man to take up his pallet and walk away carrying it in sight of the people in the area. He knew it was the Sabbath and was doubtless aware that the Jews regarded carrying a load like that as a violation of Sabbath law. Jesus was purposeful in this instruction and clearly intended to create a controversy with the Jewish authorities. But what was His goal in this provocation?

- Was He simply trying to irritate them or, worse yet, was He intentionally stoking their hatred and commitment to His execution? (Some have argued that Jesus devised all of His actions and teaching toward the goal of insuring that He'd be put to death.) Jesus obviously understood the key role of Calvary in His mission, but this doesn't mean His public ministry served no larger purpose; He didn't structure His activities during those three years with only His crucifixion in mind.
- Was He then attempting to demonstrate to the Jews that they'd misinterpreted and misapplied the Sabbath law? To frame this in terms of Reformed Theology, was Jesus exposing and condemning rabbinical corruptions of the Sabbath law with the goal of affirming and re-establishing that law in its initial, Mosaic form?
- Or, could it be that He was staging a confrontation with the Jews regarding the Sabbath in order to make a larger point? The preceding consideration of the circumstances of this healing episode suggests that this was indeed His design.

The restored man did as Jesus directed him and immediately caught the attention of the onlookers. Interestingly, John made no mention of the *people's* reaction, though many were doubtless shocked and amazed at seeing this man who been crippled for decades now walking among them in perfect health. But not all shared this response; the Jewish authorities were shocked, not by the miraculous healing, but by the outrage of this man violating the Sabbath. John focused his attention on these individuals (5:9-10), underscoring the fact that Jesus orchestrated this miracle with them in mind.

- a. When these rulers saw the healed man carrying his pallet, they confronted him with his offense, to which he replied that he was simply following the instructions of the man who had healed him. They then demanded to know who this person was, but he was unable to identify him because Jesus had slipped away in the excitement that ensued after the healing (5:11-13).
- b. But this was not to be the end of the story or of the man's interaction with his healer. John recorded that Jesus later approached the man while he was in the temple area and exhorted him concerning the healing he'd received (5:14). This statement is arguably the most challenging part of the entire context and is especially troubling when interpreted through the lens of traditional notions of obedience and divine favor. The world runs on *reciprocity* and human beings naturally, if not unconsciously, import this human dynamic into their religious convictions: All religions are united in the principle that divine powers (personal or otherwise) exercise favor toward those who honor and submit to them. Those who refuse such deference are rewarded with disfavor or even retribution.

This is the psychology of human religion and Christianity isn't exempt. Whether or not it takes the form of formal dogma or conscious conviction, it remains true that most Christians relate to God in terms of the principle of reciprocity: Their expectations of Him – and their sense of His disposition toward them – are conditioned by their perception of their faithfulness to Him. Christians instinctively *expect* blessing in return for obedience (with them defining both) and turn to the Scriptures for vindication. The Proverbs especially are a magnet for those looking to find biblical support for the principle of divine reciprocity (cf. 3:9-10, 10:3, 11:8, 18, 21, 12:21, 15:6, 29, 19:17, 22:4, 25:21-22, etc.; cf. also Deuteronomy 28:1-14; Psalm 112:1-2; Jeremiah 18:5-10; 1 John 3:21-22).

Read through this lens, it seems Jesus was telling this man that his undeserved healing – he'd been healed as a *sinner* – obligated him hereafter to a life of obedience. God had shown Him mercy and he needed to respond in kind by forsaking his sin; if he didn't, he had every reason to expect God to repay his refusal with a calamity worse than the one he'd just been delivered from. Proceeding upon this logic, some have read Jesus' words as implying that the man's infirmity was God's recompense for his life of sin. (This mindset was common among the Jews of Jesus' day who held that any sort of affliction or calamity was the proof of sin and guilt; cf. Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-2).

A parallel approach starts with the premise that the man's physical debilitation resulted from his own sinful choices in his younger years. His affliction wasn't God's punishment, but the consequence of his own behavior, much as a person given to driving recklessly might find himself a quadriplegic. So Jesus was warning the man against returning to his former ways lest he possibly inflict upon himself a worse consequence than the one from which he'd been healed.

Other commentators and scholars view the second encounter between Jesus and the man as pertaining to his spiritual state rather than his physical condition. That is, the physical healing by the pool was the springboard for a later spiritual healing in the temple. Thus Jesus' exhortation in verse 14 was a call to repentance: *The man needed to turn from his sin in order to preclude the worse outcome of eternal condemnation.* This interpretation arguably finds some support in the subsequent passage (ref. esp. 5:25-34). At the same time, one has to ask whether the healed man would have understood Jesus' exhortation this way; whatever Jesus meant, He expected this particular individual to understand Him. So John expected his readers to interpret this statement within the immediate and larger contexts and his purpose for composing his gospel account. Read from this vantage point, it seems Jesus was indeed speaking to spiritual concerns rather than physical ones, but not exactly in the way expressed by this view.

- Israel's unbelief is a central issue in John's gospel (as the other three). Whether it consisted in hostile rejection or a misguided embrace, John emphasized that this unbelief resulted from the people's misconception of their Messiah and the nature of His work and kingdom.

- Israel was waiting for its national healing, but in an ill-conceived way. They believed God for His promises, but they misconstrued those promises and how He was going to fulfill them. Thus the afflicted man waiting at Bethesda was a picture of the nation of which he was a part. Healing had come to him, but not as he expected. Moreover, the Messiah brought this healing to him (as the prophets promised it would come to Israel), but the man didn't know him (v. 13). The day of Yahweh's visitation had come and this man personally experienced its power, yet he was poised to miss it. In this way, too, he was just like the nation of Israel.
- Thus the man's sin consisted in his *unbelief*. His misconceptions and misguided expectations had caused him to look for his healing in the wrong place and under the wrong circumstances. And now, though he'd been confronted with the truth as the True One – the Messiah who is the embodiment of Yahweh's truth (1:14, 17) – brought healing to him, this man remained in his unbelief because he didn't know Him in truth.
- Jesus approached him in the temple because this man needed to know Him in this way if he was to be truly healed. It is in this sense that the man's previous infirmity can be connected with his *sin*: He had “missed the mark” in his convictions and expectation (evident in his years spent by the pool) and now he needed to truly appropriate his healing by owning in truth the One who had healed him. Thus Jesus' warning to “stop sinning” was His call to the man to reject what he thought he knew and believe in Him as the realization of Yahweh's faithfulness to Israel and the world. So John intimated that the man came away from this second encounter with that knowledge – a knowledge which he proclaimed to the Jews (v. 15).

Jesus knew that the man's physical restoration hadn't healed his unbelief because it didn't cause him to know His healer. This, too, was a powerful portrait of Israel's interaction with its Messiah: His public ministry would virtually eradicate affliction of every sort in Israel, and yet this purging would only leave a vacuum which greater uncleanness and calamity would rush in to fill (cf. Matthew 9:35; Luke 11:14-32). Jesus' healing work would ultimately leave Israel unhealed because of the nation's continuing unbelief. And the result would be a greater affliction than that which Jesus purged (ref. Luke 19:37-44, 23:20-31).

Thus Jesus' warning to the healed man constituted His warning to the whole nation of Israel: *They must not misconstrue the healing work He'd done among them; it authenticated Him and signified the purging He'd come to perform, but it didn't accomplish it. Like this man, Israel could receive her physical healing and still continue in her unbelief unto greater affliction in desolation and destruction.*

- c. John's intent in recounting this healing episode and its aftermath was to further illumine the dynamic of unbelief which afflicted Israel and the remedy for it. Authentic faith in the true Jesus was the remedy, but many insisted on refusing it.

And so John moved immediately from the man's healing at Jesus' hand to the continuing sickness of Jewish unbelief expressed in the symptoms of resentment, rejection and opposition (5:16-18). Two things, in particular, fueled those responses: the fact that Jesus instructed the man to carry his pallet on the Sabbath and His self-justification that He was doing His Father's work.

These two provocations are related and were intentionally orchestrated by Jesus to confront the Jews with the reality and nature of their unbelief. The people of Israel – and preeminently the religious elite – were thoroughly convinced that they knew the God of their fathers, the prophets, and the Scriptures, and that they served Him faithfully. Jesus knew otherwise; He knew that their faith was actually unbelief and rebellion and He confronted His countrymen with this fact simply by His own faithfulness – that is, by His truthful testimony to Israel's God by His person, words and deeds. In this instance, Jesus' healing action and instruction to the man challenged the Jews' convictions and sensibilities about the Sabbath law and what it meant to keep the Sabbath and honor God in that regard (cf. also 7:14-24, 9:1-16). Confronted in this way, they had two options: They could rethink their own understanding and practice, or they could conclude that this man Jesus was a law-breaker and oppose Him as such; here, as in every such challenge to their convictions, they chose the latter.

When they learned of this violation, the Jews came to the man and demanded an explanation. He told them his healer had directed him to carry his pallet. They must have pressured him to find out who this healer was because the man later returned with that information (5:15). When they learned that Jesus was the culprit, they went to confront Him; not only had He broken the Sabbath, He'd dragged another man into His transgression. Jesus responded to their accusation with a shocking assertion which only heightened their indignation: *His actions at Bethesda were in complete accord with God; He was only doing what God Himself was doing* (ref. 5:19). From the Jews' vantage point, this claim was blasphemous because it set God against His own law, thereby making *Him* a law-breaker. It never occurred to them that they'd misconstrued the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath law and that *they* were its transgressors; no, in their minds they were faithful to the Sabbath; it was this man Jesus who was the law-breaker and now He was adding to His guilt by seeking to impugn God.

But Jesus was actually asserting something far more provocative. He wasn't insisting just that His work paralleled God's; by referring to Yahweh as His Father, Jesus was claiming that His actions were Yahweh's actions. *He was, in effect, telling these Jews that they were observing their God and His words and works when they observed Jesus and the things He said and did.* This is a central theme in John's gospel and one that reappears in various ways throughout his account (cf. 5:19-36 with 8:12-58, 10:22-38, 11:38-42, 12:44-50, 14:1-11, 15:18-24, etc.). If Jesus' Sabbath actions provoked their outrage, His justification of them did all the more; if there previously was any doubt that Jesus needed to die, He'd just removed it (5:18; cf. 7:1-26 and 11:1-54; note also 8:31-40).

Measured against the prevailing Jewish doctrine, Jesus' actions were a flagrant violation. He transgressed the prohibition forbidding all Sabbath work and compounded the offense by implicating another. And if that weren't enough, He defended His actions by claiming that He was following the lead of Israel's God – and not merely as a faithful Israelite, but as the devoted Son of His Father. The implication was clear: *The God who commanded Sabbath rest for His covenant people was working on the Sabbath, and He was doing so in the person of His Son.* From this vantage point it's easy to see why the Jews responded as they did; Jesus was confronting them with things they couldn't process. At the very least, His actions and words overloaded their theological circuitry. Their understanding of God and what it meant to be His people left them shocked by what they saw in Jesus. The accusation that He was either mad or demon-possessed was no mere pejorative; there was no other reasonable explanation for a Jew who behaved and spoke as Jesus did.

All of this raises the important question: *Given that Jesus and the Jews were interacting with the same Sabbath commandment, what accounted for the radical differences in their interpretation of it?* Again, a common answer is that the Jews had corrupted the Sabbath law through centuries of rabbinical tinkering and Jesus was upholding it as God intended at Sinai. (Hence the Reformed doctrine of the Sabbath rest permitting deeds of necessity and mercy.) The rabbis *did* embellish and distort the Sabbath law, *but even its Mosaic administration argued against what happened that day in Jerusalem*; if gathering firewood on the Sabbath was a capital offense (and not a so-called “deed of necessity”), certainly carrying one's pallet was (ref. Numbers 15:32-35). Yahweh had demanded the death of the man gathering wood; how, then, could Jesus claim to be doing Yahweh's work in healing this man and directing him to carry his pallet on the Sabbath? Arguing that Jesus was applying the Sabbath law in its pure Mosaic form simply will not work.

The key is recognizing that the Sabbath law, like the entire Decalogue and Mosaic Law encompassing it, served a preparatory and prophetic role. If all of the salvation history – and so the Scriptures which recorded and interpreted it – had its ultimate referent and fulfillment in Messiah, then the same was true of the Mosaic code in all of its particulars, including the Sabbath law (cf. 5:39ff with Matthew 11:11-15; Luke 24:25-27, 44-45; cf. also Galatians 3:19-25 with 4:21-31.) The Sabbath served a christological and christotelic function; it had both its meaning and intent in the Messiah and the fulfillment that came in Him. Thus Jesus didn't abolish it, He fulfilled it (Matthew 5:17). *And He fulfilled the Sabbath law, not by complying with a legal prescription, but by embodying in Himself that which the Sabbath signified.* God gave Israel His sabbaths (not just the weekly Sabbath) as part of His covenant instruction respecting their identity and obligation as His elect son. Israel was set apart to its Lord and Father and was to live out its sonship in consecrated worship and service. The principle of *shabbat* (rest) was fundamental to this because it testified to who Israel was (elect son) and what it was called to do (instrument of creational renewal). Thus *shabbat* had two dimensions: a *creational* one (ref. Exodus 20:8-11) and a *covenantal* one (Exodus 16, 31:12-17; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). *Shabbat* defined the original creation in its relation to God (Genesis 2:1-3) and *christified shabbat* is the destiny of the renewed creation. Even now, those who share in Christ, the true Image-Son and Sabbatic Man, have entered into the unending, all-embracing *shabbat* that is *yea and amen* in Him (ref. Romans 14:5-8; Colossians 2:16-17; Hebrews 3:5-4:10).