

“Free Will: Impotent Apart From Christ”

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Texts: John 5:1-15; Romans 5:6-8 and Ephesians 2:1-10

The scenario at the Pool of Bethesda, “the house of mercy,” is a microcosm of the world as we know it. When Jesus attended a feast of the Jews as recorded in John 5 we read this: beneath five roofed colonnades, **lay a multitude of invalids**, persons beset with various degrees of impotence, or helplessness—people who were damaged, vulnerable and dependent. They were all looking for a miracle for the Pool of Bethesda was believed to be, **when an angel stirred the waters**, possessed of healing properties *but only for the first person who managed to enter the waters first*. So, first come, first served prevailed in this situation “which seems to be the law of nature under sin.” (B. Thomas, [bible hub.com](http://biblehub.com)) This echo of “survival of the fittest” should be noted because at this healing place, where a notable act of mercy is reputed to transpire (the angel comes, the pool stirs and someone is healed). Persons, suffering under various conditions, of disability and of disqualifying diseases, diseases that result in dependency and social handicap even today, are indiscriminately healed. Only the first one in is healed, regardless of the condition, or disease. Jesus operates by a different standard; He heals out of His compassion for us. He acts on our misery, responding to our suffering—He doesn’t leave it up to chance and opportunity.

There is a marvelous parallel to this healing in John 9-10 where Jesus heals a man **blind from birth**. The matter of sin, **Did this man sin, or his parents that he was born blind? The disciples asked**. Jesus’ response is startling: **It was not that this man sinned, or his parents** (so as to cause congenital blindness!) **but that the works of God might be displayed in him**. He was blind in order to showcase the power and mercy of God. Our God makes good to come out of evil. He reverses the curse and seizes victory from what appears to be a triumph of evil. God doesn’t waste our rebellion, our sin, or our suffering—no, refines us, he prepares us for ministry, he matures us and, openly allows us to do works of God in compassion, ministry, caring. How clearly do we see that **His ways are not our ways**. God saves the wicked, the unrighteous, **His enemies (yes, while we were yet enemies** (Romans 5:8 **But God proves His love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. . . . 10 For if, when we were enemies of God, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life! . . . while we were dead in our trespasses and sins** (Ephesians 2:1,5) God interferences, intervenes and intercedes for us! Do note the **works of God** expressed here—the charge that He violated the Sabbath prohibition on work is probably centered here: the healing of the blind man and the healing of the paralytic were both **works of God**.

16 For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. 17 But He answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.”

Another link between the healing of the paralytic (an impotent man) and the verses cited from Romans 5 is found in Romans 5:6: **For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly! Ungodly and weak** correspond to Ephesians 2’s **dead in trespasses and sins!**

We should also note the variety of invalids, of afflictions represented poolside: **blind, lame and paralyzed.** (v. 3) **A multitude of the impotent**—each handicapped and some more than others. It hardly seems an equitable starting line. The blind would be at a disadvantage because they couldn't see the turbulence and move ahead . . . the paralyzed would always bring up the rear, behind the lame—unless they had someone, a helper, to toss them into the pool quickly . . . in first place *as it were*. I suppose that all present were possessed of free will. ***But what if free will is distributed like physical ability, or disabilities—unfairly, or inequitably.*** Is this an opportunity for God to be glorified, as Jesus says? Is this not opportunity for us to show kindness and to extend the mercy of God as manifested to us and meant to extend through us?

What if free will, instead of being a uniform and universal capacity that everyone is endowed with equally, we are, in actuality, very like this diverse multitude around the pool of Bethesda?

What if some are “*able bodied*” when it comes to exercising free will; whereas others are incapacitated? Certainly moral discretion varies all over the place—some choosing wisely and others . . . well, unwisely. Why not free will? Some seem capable of ruling themselves and others come across as clueless—not just ignorant, but foolish. Some are legally blind, others totally blind. Some are hearing impaired, not totally deaf! Some are lame but not paralyzed. And thank God we have devices to better the condition of those who are variously impaired. We all proceed from utter dependency to a state of dependency again, in our old age—if we live a normal life span.

Free will is the philosophical bedrock of our moral universe, or the basis of moral discretion/free choice, which, supposedly exonerates a sovereign God from predestinating some to sin and, consequently, consigning them arbitrarily to hell. “All who go to hell choose to go there” is a free will position. We are responsible for our choices. Free will has some validity in presupposing personal responsibility rather than indicting God for “cruel, or vicious condemnation” of the morally incompetent—our poor choices matter. ***Hell as a just place of righteous punishment***, we might note in passing, stumbles many conscientious souls. It is critical to see “just” and “righteous” as “merciful and loving” because the punishment of evil and the vindication, or reward of good and faithful saints is equitable.

If we are sin dominated (as in all sin), if we are in bondage to sin; we are captives to sin, we are not “free.” If we are forgiven and spirit-filled, if we are in Christ, we are free indeed. Furthermore, if all sin, then none are free! We are not talking here about a political right but a spiritual condition. *As we are Christians first and Americans second, this qualification is important to make.* Adam as created and those spiritually recreated (regenerate) are “free” because Christ has set them free—again, forgiven and spirit-filled. Yet the world simultaneously declares that “man is everywhere in chains.” This secular piece of humanistic lore is more than a difference of opinion, it is an alternate frame of reference. It is analogous to the biblical doctrine of human depravity, the chains being our bondage of the will under sin. I ask, as it is necessary to do so, is this domination by “sin” socially derived, or spiritually deprived? Does society oppress us, or does society simply organize individuals who are oppressed? I support the latter, how about you?

Now Jesus selects out of this multitude a man whose plight is both helpless and miserable—**for a work of God, a healing**. We are not told that he is the most miserable person there but he has been an invalid for thirty-eight years and has been lying there **for a long time**. *He appears to be representative of the general impotence of man under sin—a universal plague.* Now to this man, Jesus says, **Do you want to be healed?** As the case proceeds, Jesus might have asked, *Do you want to be forgiven of your paralyzing sin?* This would appear in an amplified version!

The thought of paralyzing sin, as a condition of spiritual impotence, has probably not occurred to many of us *as the primary cause because we are secularized in our thinking!* The sin pattern leads to endless repetition (the same old, same old) and a rat race of an existence where like an animal in a cage running on a wheel/treadmill. Sin, as it were, handicaps, impairs, our free will. The consequence of the Fall affects both will and reason. Sin is something other than the exceeding sinfulness of sin which Paul speaks of—the necessity of seeing sin as a terrible offense; or, as I recently pointed out, seeing sin as evil. Not as a misstep, mistake, error, accident, weakness, traceable to our socialization, poor parenting, social deprivation, poverty or whatever other rationalization we might invent to evade the frank admission of sin as the evil it is. If a Christian fired falls into sin, picture him thus: as someone fastened by a stout chain to an immovable post and starving to death. By this means, let your compassion be stirred up to care for that brother or sister—to nurture and feed and more *to seek to release him from his bondage to sin*. Anyone **who sins is a slave to sin**.

34 Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. 35 The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. 36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

And how do we free that brother? We bring him to the place of confessing his sin, and to repenting of that sin—then the forgiveness obtained by the blood of Christ avails for him. He is forgiven, the chain is broken; he is free again.

THEREFORE we truly need a radical view of sin as evil; it is the first step to confession and repentance—both being soul-saving responses to spiritual conviction. Two things:

First: WHEN IT COMES TO CALLING OUT “SIN,” WE TEND TO BE VERY SELECTIVE, OR PICKY. YOUR SINS ARE CLEAR AND REPREHENSIBLE, MY DARLING SINS . . . NOT SO MUCH. We are hard on the sins in others that pose no particular threat to ourselves—thus we feel “more righteous;” the sins of others are odious to us perhaps because they aren’t as controlling to us as to those held in their throes.

Second: it is not the case that we are ignorant of good and evil, or cannot distinguish between the path of righteousness and the path of wickedness. Scripture supplies the litmus test! No, we know and we choose between the two paths almost daily—whichever suits our fancy, lusts or present desires.

- There’s animal/natural and spiritual/supernatural
- There’s immanent and transcendent
- There’s heaven and hell, and up and down.

We are self-centered and self-pampering creatures and pretend a lot. We need a crisis, or calamity . . . or to get into a tight spot, morally speaking, to provoke consideration of our true condition. Am I as good as I think I am? Am I fooling myself to impress others? Am I coddling sin? Do I view sin as evil? Do I accept the reality of that evil even to admitting to my personal depravity?

I think that the paralytic is oblivious when it comes to these things. *Stone stupid* when it comes to his spiritual condition. He knows enough to seek a natural cure for his physical condition, but he doesn't know to search his heart . . . to ferret out how he came to his present state. He believes in the healing properties of the pool. And he feels acutely the victimhood, the isolation, the abandonment: **I have no one to put me in the pool.** He doesn't cry out, "I am dying and I need rescue." "I am perishing and I need a Savior." It is true under the constraints of his situation, his situation is hopeless . . . hence the misery bordering on despair. *There is no mercy in paralysis, in terminal illness but our God who intervenes, interrupts, intrudes can alter everything!* And of what He asks you to do that you cannot do, He does for us. He operates between worlds and between people; He knows both parties to the conflict well. He leads both to reconciliation, working in each and at once to obtain His purposes (His own glory) to our blessing, and is our help and our forgiveness because He loves us.

Now my view is that the low and paltry cry of his heart is what draws Jesus to him! Divine mercy is not tethered to the occasional stirring of the waters, regardless of angelic participation. **Do you want to be healed?** What a penetrating question! Do you want to be set free? Do you want your brokenness—undeniable as it is—or do you want to be whole? The man as he is, is stuck. He is going on about the impediments to his getting the cure. Jesus cuts him off: **Get up, take up your bed, and walk.**

Three curt, abrupt commands are issued by Jesus. They are a total contradiction of the man's paralysis. Jesus is asking the impossible. He doesn't say, "Dream the impossible dream!" Now why does Jesus do that? Because He always does so:

- To the paralytic beside the pool (John 5)
- To the woman taken in adultery (John 8)
- To the man let down through the roof of His house (Luke 5)

Jesus has the power to forgive and the authority to command.

Have you noticed that whenever Jesus commands us to do anything, the power to comply comes with the command? Always. It is a package deal. Jesus doesn't ask us to do what we cannot do! **He asks us to do what He has commanded.** Then it is up to us. Will we trust and obey?

Remember, the fishermen had fished *all night*. They come to shore exhausted, depleted and weary—sort of impotent. Jesus commandeers one of their boats and when He is done preaching, He says, **Peter, put out to deeper waters and let down your nets for a catch.** (Luke 56:4-11) Peter *impotently* replies, **Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing. But I will do as you say, we will let down our nets.** Then, when he obeys, through the power of Christ in response to their obedience, they caught an immense catch of fish! The fish were also obedient to fill the nets as commanded—

waves, wind, fish and men—they are all subject to their King. Yes, all, just as the paralytic, **And, at once, the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.** (v. 9) ***If we did what we are told to do, our lives would have purpose and we would have direction.*** Aimless is fruitless. Later in the gospel, Peter wanted to walk on water. Jesus commanded him, “Come!” Peter obeyed and, until he doubted, water was pavement beneath his feet.

What happens next in John 5 is a rude little interlude. What John introduces is the matter of Jesus’ authority. His sovereign right to heal on the Sabbath, even despite the petty laws of ceremonial men. The joyless, angry and accusatory Jews, bypassing the fact that a paralyzed man was carrying his bed (!) and walking home (!) supposedly, interrogate the man: **Who is it that said to you, “Take up your bed and walk?”** And he didn’t even know! **Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, as Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place.** (v. 13) The Jews (stuck in sin, hating without cause and fearing without cause) weren’t into celebrating the man’s healing; they were building their case against Jesus—or so it would appear. Maclaren writes about the man’s answer, translating: As if he had said: “He gave me the power, had he not a right to tell me what to do with it?” A good question. Has God not given us life? Does He retain the right to tell us how to live that life? Is all that not part of the power and authority of our Creator?! May I suggest, friends, we are too soon done with God; yet God is never done with us!

Jesus subsequently meets the healed man in the temple and says, **Behold, you are whole/well. Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.** I wish to return to **Sin no more** in a moment. But first let’s deal with **you are whole**. It means you are well, you are spiritually recovered. You are forgiven your sins. And there follows a warning: don’t relapse. Now don’t go back. *This warning is very needed.* Why? “There is always the danger that we shall fall back into old sins, even if we think we have overcome them. The mystic influence of habit, enfeebled will, the familiar temptation, the imagination rebelling, the memory tempting, sometimes even, as in the case of a man who has been a drunkard, the physical effect of the odor of his temptation upon his nostrils—all these things make it extremely unlikely that a man who has once been under the condemnation of any evil is never be tempted to fail under its sway.” Maclaren is suggesting that we begin sinning, rebelling in our imagination; we relish the prospect of it (its delights, promised pleasures, the dependable euphoria, the high from our drug of choice). That it leads to death is set aside! Imagination, powered by memory and driven by our urgent felt needs arm us to sin! This is much like arming an explosive device, or a booby trap. . . we design and devise our re-entry and relapse; it is fully planned. Therefore we relapse on purpose, plan in hand. Such is the power of un-confronted sin.

So, back to **sin no more**. It is indisputable that this is a command. And everyone acknowledging that it is impossible not to sin—**for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God**—is it not impossible for us for us not to sin?! We want to obey, yes; we wish to comply but we cannot—there is **a law operating in our members**, even the power of sin. Does Jesus ask the impossible of us? Well, was what He asked of the paralytic impossible? Yes, we say, but he was healed.

Okay, were you not healed likewise? Is not the same empowerment which enabled the man to arise, take up his bed and walk available to us? If not, what is salvation for?

We couldn't keep the law. Did that nullify the law? By no means. **The law is perfect.** And yet we read people did keep the law—it is so written—what the law lacked *for most folk* was the power to perform it.

Yet God has always enabled obedience. Always worked our sanctification so as to make us holy. . . make us His. He has always imparted faith, power and favor to His own.

Remember the faith hall of fame in Hebrews 11. God has been pleased, can be pleased and will be pleased! He is not impotent, He is powerful to bring about His will His way in His time. Always we can count on Him and count on that. The real issue is: can God count on you? Will you **arise, take up your bed and walk**? Will you sin no more? Of course, you cannot succeed at this on your own; but through Christ and with the indwelling Spirit will you fix your gaze on the upward call of God in Christ? Christ within wills no one to sin—just the opposite. We pray **Thy will be done** and it is so. Don't just say it, mean it.

We do not have any excuse: What Christ commands, He enables. Through Him, through the power of the indwelling Spirit we can, we should, we will obey Jesus and **sin no more**. YES, WE WILL SIN. BUT WHEN WE DO, WE HAVE AN ADVOCATE. We arise, dust ourselves off and go forth determined not to sin—the target never changes. But hopefully, as time goes on we get closer and closer to a perfect bull's eye. But that cannot happen if we do not aim at it!

Amen