

“The Miracle of Grace”
John 5:1-18
June 26, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

We come today to the third of John’s seven recorded miracles of Jesus. It is another healing miracle by which Jesus restored a man’s ability to walk after thirty-eight years of being an invalid. It is an impressive display of Jesus’ power. With one simple command—**“Get up, take up your bed, and walk”**—healing came instantly to this man. Legs that hadn’t walked in almost four decades were both healed and strengthened. The motor part of the brain that tells the muscles what to do was immediately given the ability to know how to walk, even though after thirty-eight years that knowledge had grown rusty, if not non-existent.

As impressive as is the display of power demonstrated by this miracle, it is an even greater display of the grace of Jesus. We can begin to get a sense of this simply by asking how many bad guys there are in this story. There is clearly one set of enemies in the Jewish leaders who find fault with Jesus for telling the healed man to take up his bedroll and walk. Their criticism stemmed from the fact that this was the Sabbath, and carrying even the slightest load on the Sabbath was considered by them to be a violation of the fourth commandment. In their blindness, they completely missed the fact that an amazing miracle had occurred. By the end of the story, their hatred of Jesus has grown to the point that they want to kill him.

What about the lame man? Is he also a bad guy in this story? When he is rebuked by the Jewish leaders for carrying his bedroll on the Sabbath, he immediately deflects the criticism by saying that the man who healed him told him to do it. Interestingly, he hadn’t even made the effort to get Jesus’ name. Jesus finds the man a little later to encourage him further, and it was then that he learned Jesus’ name. But he doesn’t put that knowledge to good use, using it instead to score some points with the Jewish leaders by finding them and telling them that it was Jesus who had told him to carry his bedroll on the Sabbath. He throws Jesus under the bus, even though it was Jesus who had brought such good to the man through the healing.

There is one good guy in this story whose courage, power, love and grace is of epic proportions. Instead of saving himself, he acts powerfully and graciously for others, even the most evil and selfish. Let’s look at this miraculous display of the grace of Jesus.

I. An Act of Grace

This story unfolds in four scenes, and it is the first scene where we begin to see the grace of Jesus. This initial scene takes place at a pool called Bethesda, around which are gathered a large number of disabled people. The reason they are there is that they believed the water had healing powers for the first one to jump in after the waters were stirred. So picture this scene. Numerous handicapped people were gathered around this pool, and all faced challenges in getting into the water first. The blind were able to get there quickly, but they needed assistance in seeing the stirring of the waters. The lame and paralyzed could see well enough, but they would have required assistance in getting into the water first once they saw the stirring.

The man who is the object of Jesus' attention is in a worse condition than the others for the simple reason that he has no one to help him. He is friendless. I wonder how many times he had been frustrated in his efforts. Perhaps he had often been one of the first to see the stirring of the water, after which he would begin frantically and pitifully to drag himself toward the pool. But inevitably either a blind person who heard the commotion and could move quickly or another invalid with a helper would manage to beat him into the water.

As Jesus wades into this mass of broken humanity, he selects for his miraculous intervention the man who is worse off than the others. It is very different from the way the world thinks about how to get favors from God. The world thinks like the dominant thought at this pool, that procuring this gift from God requires being quicker than everyone else. The grace of God is a competitive sport in which God selects the best. It may acknowledge that we are all broken, but then goes on to think that some are less broken than others. It says, "I may be broken, but I'm not as bad as some others and that's why God has saved me." A mark of the grace of God throughout the Bible is that God only gives his grace to those who forsake any claim to his grace. God selects as the objects of his grace those who are most helpless and know their helplessness.

The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians about God's grace when he said, **"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God"** (1 Cor. 1:26-29). God chose things that are not—he chose nothings. This is intended to humble us all. God chose you not because you were better than others but because he judged you to be a nothing. The miracle of God's transforming grace was given to you not because you were more deserving than others but to show what an amazing grace he had by saving the least deserving.

Notice how Jesus goes about bringing this miracle to this man. He approaches him and asks him a puzzling question: **"Do you want to be healed?"** Isn't the answer obvious? Why does Jesus ask this question? I think probably his

desires needed to be awakened and healed as well as his body. We often cope with disappointment through denial of desires. It helps to keep the pain away to do so. But what if our desires are actually given to us by God to connect us back to God's purpose for us? They do so through the recognition that nothing less than God's miraculous intervention will be required if these desires are to be met. That's why Jesus asked this question. He wanted the man to say, "Yes, I want to walk. I want to be free, to be strong, to roam in God's world as I desire."

The lame man's answer to Jesus' question about his desires is not a simple "Yes" or "No," but something that sounds much more like self-pity. It amounts to, "I am friendless and I'm a failure." Self-pity is often our unbelieving response to the brokenness of our lives. It seeks to avoid the pain of unmet desires through what amounts to anger at ourselves. God's intention, on the other hand, is for us to be honest about our desires. And if those desires are unmet, then we take that pain to Jesus. Jesus is going to meet every good desire he has placed within us. He may not meet it on our timetable, but he will meet it in the time required by his greater wisdom.

He met this man's desire, even though he was not at the place of being willing to be honest about those desires. In his grace, Jesus was the friend of the friendless. He is a friend unlike any other. He doesn't say, "I'll stay here with you and help you get to the water first." He also doesn't say, "O, just hang in there; I know you'll be first one day. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." Jesus simply says to him, "**Get up, take up your bed, and walk**" (v. 8). What Jesus commands, he always enables. He not only heals the man's legs, but strengthens them as well, restoring muscle tone and ligament strength.

II. An Escalation of Grace

The story doesn't end here because the grace of Jesus doesn't end here. Scene two is at some undisclosed location in Jerusalem. We find out in this scene that Jesus did this miracle on the Sabbath. A group of Jewish leaders sees this man carrying his mat, and they point out to him that such activity is against the law on the Sabbath. It wasn't against the law of the Old Testament, found in the fourth commandment, but against the manmade laws that had been erected out of the fourth commandment. The thought among many Jews at this time was that obedience to God could be secured if they fenced the law of God. If there is a cliff of disobedience out there, you don't just build a fence on the cliff's edge, but two hundred feet back from the edge so that you never even get close to the edge. So the fourth commandment required that no work be done on the Sabbath. In order to protect people from getting even close to violating that law, all kinds of manmade laws were multiplied, to the point that it became a bit ridiculous. For example, it was against their law to wear false teeth on the Sabbath, not because that act in itself was sinful, but because the teeth might fall out and cause you to bend over and pick them up, an act considered work and therefore a violation of the Sabbath in their minds.

So these Sabbath police notice this man carrying his bedroll on the Sabbath and stop him to tell him that he is violating the Sabbath. He is quick with an answer, shifting the blame to Jesus. “This is someone else’s idea, not my own. The man who healed me told me to carry this mat.” His accusers quickly saw that their law was in much greater danger from one who would encourage others to break it than from a single lawbreaker, so they asked him to identify this man and he couldn’t. It is staggering to note that they are far more concerned that their law has been broken than that a great healing has taken place. Did you notice the omission in their question of verse 12? They leave out the part about the healing and go straight to the part about taking up the bed. They don’t ask who healed him, but only who told him to take up his mat.

The third scene is at the temple again, where Jesus finds the man he had healed and tells him, **“See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you”** (v. 14). It is at this time that the invalid discovers the name of Jesus. His true character is then on display to us as we read that he then seeks out the Sabbath police and tells them that it was Jesus who had told him to take up his bed and walk. This was a betrayal of the one who had set him free from his disability. He volunteered information that he knew would get Jesus in trouble, seemingly just to save his own neck.

Jesus’ continuing interaction with this man, as well as his interactions with the Jewish leaders, shows his extraordinary grace. Notice first his pursuit of the healed invalid. Jesus finds him to bring further healing to his life. He has been healed physically, but there is a greater danger he faces. **“See, you are well! Sin no more that nothing worse may happen to you”** (v. 14). What is Jesus talking about? What is the thing worse than this man’s handicap from which Jesus healed him? When sin runs rampant in our lives, it unleashes destructive chaos, a chaos that ends in hell. The worse thing Jesus is warning this man about is hell. And he is warning a man who is about to betray him.

But what should we think about Jesus’ recommended action for avoiding this terrible outcome of hell? He tells the man to “sin no more.” Isn’t it the case that rescue from hell is through faith in Jesus rather than self-effort to stop sinning? It is, but Jesus must first humble this man by his need before he can come to believe. So he commands him to do something that, if he seriously undertook it, he would quickly discover his need of Jesus.

So we see two deliverances here. Jesus first delivered the man from his physical disability and now seeks to deliver him from the greater disability we all have, the one caused by our sin nature. The first deliverance required power from Jesus, while the second will require something far more costly—his very life. To deliver this man from his sin, Jesus will die as his substitute.

Many people today want God to grant the first kind of deliverance, from all the brokenness of the world, but care nothing for the second kind, deliverance from

sin. We want God to end all disease so that we can then do we want to do regardless of what God wants us to do. Jesus loves us too much to allow that. He knows that the spiritual danger of sin is the far greater danger. He would go to any length that we might avoid this danger, and he does go to the uttermost in dying.

But that's not all. There is a second group of people present here, to which Jesus demonstrates his extraordinary grace. The moralistic rule keepers who object to his command to the man to pick up his bed and walk, even though it's the Sabbath, find themselves at odds with Jesus. Notice Jesus' response to them. **"My Father is working until now, and I am working."** That's a bold claim, and they understand exactly what he is saying. He is saying that he is permitted to work on the Sabbath because God works on the Sabbath, and he is equal with God. The result of this claim is that **"they were seeking all the more to kill him"** (v. 18). Jesus certainly wasn't being very diplomatic here. Surely he could have found a way to quell their anger a little bit. He could have said, "I appreciate your zeal for the Sabbath and agree with you, but let's keep this in perspective. This is a time to celebrate this man's freedom." Jesus goes the other direction and doubles down, making a claim that has the effect of adding fuel to the fire of their anger. Why does he do that? Because he is being full of grace to the moralistic rule-keepers as well. He is saying the same thing to them that he said to the healed invalid. "The path of rule-keeping you are following does not end well. Your only hope is to humble yourself and receive me as your Messiah."

There are multiple ironies with these leaders so concerned about Sabbath observance. The Sabbath is about rest, and their rules required hard work to keep. Further, they accuse Jesus, the one who brings the great Sabbath rest, rest from sin and its brokenness, of violating the Sabbath. Then, they violate the Sabbath by working hard not to bring life, but to kill Jesus. In his extraordinary grace, Jesus wants to bring rest to these Sabbath breakers too.

So here we have the amazing grace of Jesus for two kinds of people: the betrayer of Jesus and the moralistic rule-keepers. Jesus loves sinners, all different kinds of sinners. And he pursues them with his love. Do you remember what Jesus said to Judas the betrayer when he came to betray him? **"Friend, do what you came to do"** (Matt. 26:50).

CONCLUSION:

Are you able to sing the first stanza of that great hymn? "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." A licentious slave trader is converted by the grace of God and becomes a preacher during the English Great Awakening. The message of that hymn is that we are all helpless wretches before a holy God. But the friend of sinners, our Lord Jesus, offers to any who will accept it, the miracle of his grace. Whether your wretchedness takes the form of rule-keeping or of rule-breaking, the grace of God is for you.