

In the previous 3 chapters, we've witnessed a series of scenes where Jesus has challenged and replaced key religious institutions - ritual washings, the Temple, the Teacher of the Law, the sacred well and the sacred mountain. There is a transition in this chapter and the next four towards a focus on Jewish festivals, where Jesus uses the occasion of the festival to teach on a deeper level about himself. This chapter, which appears to be out of order chronologically, focuses on the Sabbath, which is in many ways fundamental to all of the other festivals. The Sabbath was a key distinguishing part of Jewish life and religion and it set them apart from the the rest of the culture around them. And they took it seriously - God had commanded no work on this day, and the Jews, the Pharisees in particular had very strict definitions of what did or did not constitute work.

Jesus takes this opportunity to perform a work and to use the ensuing crisis as a platform to reveal himself.

One commentator describes this chapter as a trial, with a crime, prosecution, and defense<sup>1</sup>:

**The Crime (5: 1– 15)**

- A man at Bethesda is healed on the Sabbath
- The man is interrogated
- The criminal [Jesus] is identified

**The Prosecution (5: 16– 18)**

- First basis: Jesus violates the Sabbath
- Second basis: Jesus is making divine claims

**Jesus' Defense (5: 19– 47)**

- Jesus describes his “criminal” work
- Jesus brings witnesses in his defense
- Jesus prosecutes his opponents
- Jesus identifies their crimes
- Jesus challenges their ability to appeal

**The Crime**

***“After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was***

***there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me." 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. Now that day was the Sabbath. 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." But he answered them, "The man who healed me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed, and walk.'***

To put the plight of a paraplegic in the context of the first century, one author writes<sup>2</sup>:

"The challenges of a paraplegic in the twenty-first century (which are considerable) pale by comparison with a person in the first century. Problems of mobility and livelihood and social isolation just begin the list. Consider the problem of personal hygiene (which Peterson described graphically). Paraplegics frequently do not have bowel and bladder control. Taking these issues together, we can build a portrait of this man's life: People moved him from place to place unless he crawled; most of his income came from begging or from the charity of friends and family; and if he did not have bladder or bowel control, his hygiene problem would have been enormous. People stayed away from him. His hands (used for mobility) were rough and torn from the streets. I have seen these people in rural Egypt, where they live a step below the poorest of the poor. Their life is agony."

- There were a multitude of invalids at Bethesda, but he picks only one to heal. **Why?**

- Jesus has compassion on the man at Bethesda and asks if he wants to be healed. The man, not knowing who Jesus is, explains his predicament. Jesus gives no concern to any of that but gives a command and, upon obedience, heals him. His power is so great, he heals with a simple word.

- This take place on a Sabbath, and this upsets the authorities. The man is seen walking with his bed and is challenged for working. However, their anger quickly turns to the one who instigated the whole thing. The man doesn't know who healed him, but Jesus finds him and makes it clear.

- He says, "Sin no more, so that nothing worse may happen..." **What does he mean by this?** As is occasionally the case in Scripture (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:30, Haggai 1, Acts 5), Jesus draws a specific connection between this man's sin and his ailment. His need for being made well goes deeper than a physical ailment. We should not then draw the conclusion that every debilitation can be connected to a specific sin - John himself challenges this a couple chapters later in John 9. However, it is clear that this is sometimes the case, and Jesus apparently knows that it is the case for this man.

## The Prosecution

***And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." 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.***

- In the next two verses, we find out that the Jews are not too happy with Jesus. The word persecute here is a technical term in legal discourse meaning prosecute - their persecution of Jesus is setup here as the prosecution in a trial. They have two primary complaints against him:

- He keeps doing these things on the Sabbath. In mind here is not just this one incident of healing at the pool. As we see in the other 3 gospels, Jesus made a habit out of breaking the sabbath customs of his time in order to heal or do works of mercy.
- The second complaint is that Jesus has made himself equal with God. **How would they have understood Jesus to be making this claim?** It was agreed by the Jews that God rested from his work on the 7<sup>th</sup> day but that there was still some sense in which he continued working and was always working. Jesus claims for himself a familial right here, in that just as his Father God was able to command rest on the Sabbath while he himself continued working, so also the Son could do the same. This divine prerogative which was granted as

belonging to God, Jesus claimed for himself.

## The Trial

***So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.***

So, Jesus responds to the prosecution with his own defense, and in doing so ramps up his claims significantly. **How does he do this?** The initial complaint was that Jesus actions and claims for the Sabbath made him equal with God. He takes that to another level here. The Son imitates the Father - all that the Son is doing in the world is that which the Father is doing in the world. Just as a son of a carpenter would imitate his father and learn his trade, so Jesus imitates the Father and does what he does. Jesus gives three explanations:

**The Father Loves the Son.** For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. The love of the Father for the Son leads to the

Father revealing himself fully to the Son. Jesus has a unique knowledge and understanding of the Father.

**The Son is Sovereign over Life.** For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. Undoubtedly, no one would argue the idea that God brings life and has power to raise the dead. Jesus here claims that power and right to himself.

Here Jesus says, whoever hears my word, and believes on him who sent me has eternal life and will not enter into judgement, but has passed from death to life. **The finality of this statement should give us a bold assurance. Why?**

As the Heidelberg Catechism says:

Question: How does Christ's return "to judge the living and the dead" comfort you?

Answer: In all distress and persecution, with uplifted head, I confidently await the very judge who has already offered himself to the judgment of God in my place and removed the whole curse from me. Christ will cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation, but will take me and all his chosen ones to himself into the joy and glory of heaven.

**The Son is Sovereign over Judgment.** Likewise, no one would argue God is Judge of all the earth - Jesus here says the Father himself does not judge but has given all judgment to the Son. Jesus is the chief agent of the Father's activity in the world. He is God's agent, acting on his behalf

The Son gives life to whom he will, and he has been given all judgment and all honor. Not honoring the Son is the same as not honoring the Father. Those who believe the words of the Son, which are the words of the Father, have eternal life - now, presently. They have passed from death to life. Those who believe have already been raised - as he says, the hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear and live. The Son's work of judgment begins in the present. It does not end there, however, but extends into the future to the Last Day. He is the judge of the world and the hour is coming, but is not yet here, when ALL who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out.

(Resurrection language is being used here with two different things in view - one to eternal life upon belief in Christ, and one a physical raising of the dead at a future point, when Christ will judge the destinies of all, some to life and some to death.)

Jesus has wratched up his divine claim with an argument from the lesser to the greater - if he is permitted to do such a small thing as work on the Sabbath like his Father, how much more will he be able to the great things of bringing life and judgment? In this chapter, Jesus makes absolute claims to his unique relationship with the Father and to his Divine nature. He carries an exclusive message and authority from God. It is these claims that get him persecuted. **Are we prepared to make the same claims about Jesus and to undergo the same alienation and persecution?**

***If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me.***

Now Jesus calls witnesses to his defense. **Who are the witnesses to Christ in this section?** Witnesses of Christ -

- John the Baptist - they put up with him for a while but ultimately did not follow him.
- the works given by the Father - the works that Jesus is doing are a testimony and bear witness to his being sent by God.
- the Father himself - the Father himself has testified to Jesus (e.g. To Jesus personally, at Jesus' baptism, etc.)

***His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures because you think***

***that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"***

Jesus now turns the tables in his defense and begins a counter prosecution, pointing the Jewish leaders to their own deficiencies:

As John said, "No one has ever seen God..." They have not seen him nor heard him and they prove that they do not have the Father's words or believe in him by the fact that they have not believed the Son.

They have great knowledge of the Scriptures and expect it will give them access to the life of the Kingdom of God, but they do not come to the very one whom the Scriptures bear witness about to receive that life. The very scriptures that they held dear will testify against them in their rejection and unbelief in Christ. Moses will rise up to condemn them because Moses himself wrote of Christ. They have had plenty of opportunities and plenty of evidence to persuade them to come to Christ. It is not an intellectual deficiency but a spiritual malady - they do not see because they are blind, though they try so hard to see and make every pretense to be the ones who see.

This should be bring a fearful warning - just knowing the Scriptures will not bring you life. Knowing the Bible is not enough if it doesn't lead you to knowing Jesus and dwelling with him.

What does Jesus mean when he says you receive glory from one another?

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<sup>1</sup> Burge, Gary M. (2009-08-22). John (NIV Application Commentary, The)

(p. 122). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Burge, Gary M. (2009-08-22). John (NIV Application Commentary, The)

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