

# Making Himself Equal with God

*That You May Believe*

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**Bible Text:** John 5

**Preached on:** Sunday, April 13, 2014

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Let's take our Bibles and turn to John 5. John's gospel strikes the reader as being somewhat different from the first three gospels that we know as the Synoptic Gospels largely in the way in which he records and reports the material that he has in mind. When you look at the first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, you find that the impression that they have on us, they're telling us the stories of Jesus but John's gospel is particular and different in this sense that he is more theological in what he tells us about Jesus. In other words, he looks at the life of Christ, he recalls the incidents that have occurred, he selects from those incidents. He tells us at the very end of the gospel that there is so much that he could report. He knows already that the people who he is writing to have got Matthew, Mark and Luke, that they can consult them for kind of an overview of the pattern of his life and the direction of his life and so on, but here John has selected a number of significant events and what he has noticed is that very often there was either preceding or succeeding one of these events in Jesus' life, a block of teaching that either prepares us for it or that explicates it, that explains it, following the event. That's certainly true in this passage here. This is the second of seven signs that John uses and/or describes and his concern is primarily what do these signs tell us about who Jesus is, what they tell us about who Jesus is.

On this occasion, we find Jesus going up to another feast. He's already been to one, at least that's been reported to us. This is the second of three trips he makes to Jerusalem. This is probably AD 31. He's going up to Jerusalem for a second time and it's been about a year and a half since the Passover that's been previously mentioned. We begin by looking at the multitude that's described to us. He goes up to Jerusalem, the feast of the Jews, and there was in Jerusalem, we're told, a Sheep Gate, a pool in Aramaic called Bethesda. Now, we don't exactly know where this pool was. We do know there were a number of pools in Jerusalem. We don't even particularly know what this Sheep Gate is. Likely, this is a hole in the wall of the temple through which the sheep going in for slaughter as sacrifices would be led and it was probably outside that gate that they were washed and it was to that pool that these people came. So, I want you to understand that this is not a nice, sophisticated, hot springs kind of place. Nothing like Hot Springs, Arkansas where all the rich go and they take the springs and stay in expensive hotels. This would have been the ordinary rabble. This would be the people that you had to give

an exclusion zone around because of the smell of them and you may have met someone like that and there would be a number of them all concentrated there.

So, Jesus had to be quite intentional in order to go there and that's, in fact, what he does. He goes to the Sheep Gate, the very name of it kind of smells of it. If you've ever been near a sheep, you'll know exactly what I mean. At this gate, we're told, verse 3 there lay a multitude, a multitude of invalids: the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. So, here he goes and he goes publicly; he goes in full public view. There is a multitude of people there. What he is going to do is going to be witnessed by a multitude of people. On this occasion, he goes personally, he doesn't merely say a word and something happened at a distance. Here he goes personally into this environment and in this environment, Jesus works particularly with one individual that we have introduced to us. One man who was there. He goes to a multitude but in the multitude of people there is one man that's important for understanding of the application later on. There is one man who had been there an invalid for 38 years. For 38 years. He'd already lived longer than a lot of people lived at that time and for all of those years, he had been an invalid. Can you imagine? His whole life shaped by this experience? And Jesus saw him lying there.

So, there is this multitude of people and out of the multitude, Jesus selects this one individual. Just as he had spoken to Nicodemus one-to-one. Just as he had addressed the Samaritan woman one-to-one. Just as he had dealt with that royal official that came to him, one-to-one. He deals with this man one-to-one. So, there is a multitude and secondly, just in passing, there is a mystery here. There is a mystery that you might call the mystery of the missing verse. If you were brought up as I was, and you probably weren't because you're too young many of you, but if you were brought up as I was with the King James Version or as we called it in the UK, the Authorized Version, especially in Scotland because we didn't really like King James and weren't particularly wanting to associate him with his version of the Bible and he wasn't a very nice man. Anyway, he was a very not nice man but anyway, Presbyterians shouldn't ever call it the King James Version because he really wasn't very nice to Presbyterians but that's another matter altogether. I just said that out of interest but in the King James Version, there is another verse and it's missing. It's just not here. It's verse 4. Did you notice that? You go from 3 to 5. Did you notice that in the reading? Or were you not following the reading. Verse 4, you can find it actually in the footnotes of your English Standard Version because we're told "an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool." The writing here is so small that I can't read it. "And stirred the water: whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had."

Why is it not in the English Standard Version and it's in the King James Version? The answer is that the best, the oldest and the most common manuscripts don't have it and the likelihood is that somebody who was somewhere, somebody who was translating this saw that there was an issue, there was a question begged in this story, probably in verse 7, "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.'" They read that and they thought, "Now, there's no explanation for that so let's do a little bit of research." And he went and did a little bit of research and he found that there was a popular superstition

perhaps and so he puts a footnote or he puts a side bar referring to it and the next person comes along and thinks they'll just include that so that people will know why the waters were stirred.

So, that's the way it kind of happens. It doesn't happen very often in the Bible and any time it does happen, it's kind of obvious to us now but also, it never affects any point of the story or any point of doctrine and this doesn't here either. So, whether the missing verse reflects the reality of a superstitious background which it may very well do, is immaterial really to the flow of the story but, you know, in the interest of full disclosure, I had to mention the missing verse.

So, let's move on then to the miracle. The miracle is straight forward. It's there in the original and it's here too. Again, the miracle is as John describes miracles, a sign. In the Synoptic Gospels, the first three, miracles generally demonstrate the authority of Jesus over sickness and the way in which the miracles fulfill the Messianic mission of the Messiah as described in the book of Isaiah. But in John, the miracles are signs. They have a Christological focus, that is, they have something to teach us about who Jesus is and here in this particular miracle, the key that we're going to look at in a moment is when it took place. That's going to be absolutely crucial to our understanding of what we learn about Jesus.

So, there's a miracle and the miracle starts with what Jesus knew. Look at verse 6, "When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time." Jesus saw this man, he'd come for this man. He had deliberately come here just as he'd gone to the well at Samaria. He came looking for this man. That's what Jesus does, he deals with people personally. He came looking for this man and he knew all about him. He understood his background; he knew what his needs were; he knew what his heart longings were. Jesus knew this man. He knew this man through-and-through. And maybe you need to know tonight as you come into the house of God, you need to know that the Lord Jesus knows you. He knows you exactly. He knows you thoroughly. He knows all about you. There is nothing that you can hide from him. Nothing, no burden that you're carrying that he doesn't see or understand or know, no anxiety in your heart, no pain in your life, no memory from the past, no skeleton in the cupboard, no horrific experience that you've been through that the Lord Jesus does not know. He knows you. He knows you thoroughly. "You discern my thoughts from afar, said the Psalmist, "before a word is on my tongue, behold O Lord, you know it altogether." And Jesus knew this man.

And Jesus has compassion on this man. We see that in the fact that he went to the pool in the first place. He knew what he was doing. He was going there for this man just like he went to Samaria to find the woman at the well, in the same way he goes to sign-seeking prophet-dishonoring Galilee and meets this kingly official who comes looking to have his boy healed. Jesus always comes out of his way to reach broken-hearted people. Not self-righteous people but broken-hearted people, people who have a burden.

Notice that when he comes to this man, look at verse 6, he comes with this apparently redundant question. Did you notice that? "Do you want to be healed?" he asked the man.

It's a kind of indirect offer, "Do you want to be healed?" He was inviting the man to say, what? "Yes sir. I do." It was an invitation to the man. Now look at verse 7. The man, instead of saying yes to Jesus, explains his tragic situation. Verse 7, "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." I want you to see about this man, this is important because this man could not see beyond the water at the Sheep Gate. He could not see any other possibility for himself. He couldn't grasp that there might be something else in this universe that could do him good and so when Jesus says, "Do you want to be healed?" instead of saying yes to Jesus, he gives Jesus the story. He could see no other possibility and all he knew was, with this one possibility, year in and year out, over and over again, again and again, he had failed...he had failed...he had failed. Nothing had ever happened.

So, without any faith on the part of the man, without any faith on the part of the man, Jesus acts spontaneously, compassionately and definitely. Verse 8, "Get up, take up your mat, and walk." Now, it's interesting: this action is not a response to anything religious or faithful about the man. It looks as if Jesus simply saw his situation was so miserable for so long and took a deliberate decision in order to make this man better. The miracle came out of Jesus' compassion, not from the man's faith or the man's righteousness. I think there are about nine times in the gospels where it says that Jesus was moved with compassion or pity. Usually the word has to do with the condition of the person that is the subject or the object. He is moved by the misery you feel. His therapies, his solutions are not always what we want, of course, in our lives but he is a sympathetic high priest. He has compassion on people. There is no heartlessness in Jesus at all. There is no heartlessness in Jesus at all.

So, what Jesus knew and what Jesus felt, he felt compassion and what Jesus did. Here we have a demonstration of his power. So, his knowledge of us is absolutely entire, his compassion towards us is heartfelt and his power is immediate and it is sovereign. Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your mat and walk. And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked." At once, do you see that? That signifies the immediacy of Jesus' power. Jesus said "get up" and at once those diseased muscles became whole, those brittle bones became firm. At once, he felt the power to get up out of his mat. He hadn't been able to do that for 38 years. He had been carried, lifted and laid there and then taken away again, lifted and laid there every day, every day, over and over again. He had not been able to move and this time he felt the power. He gets up and he picks up his mat and off he goes.

What is John doing here? John is inviting us here to just observe this great miracle just as Jesus had healed the official's son from a distance, with a word. The next day when the man got there and he checked out the time, it was exactly the same time Jesus said the word that the boy was healed. Here is Jesus acting now specifically to this man, face-to-face to this man, "Get up," and the man gets up and he lifts up his bed and he walks. In other words, John is wanting us to grasp the compassion and the knowledge and the power that Jesus has to do what he wants to do for you and for me in our lives right now. He wants us to recognize, to rejoice in, to be thrilled at the fact, that Jesus has the knowledge and the compassion and the power to deal with whatever is wrong in our

lives. He has the compassion. He has the knowledge. He has the power. There is nothing that you bring Sunday-by-Sunday into the house of God that Jesus does not know what you carry. There is no circumstance in your life for which the Lord Jesus does not have compassion upon you, upon you in your time of need. And there is nothing, nothing, nothing, that is outside the power of the Lord Jesus to do something about it. Isn't that great? Are you alive? Isn't that great? The power of Jesus to do something about it.

Then there is this understanding: he does this, the man takes up his bed and walks, the man who had been healed walks off into the sunset. That was verse 9, "And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked." Now in verse 9b, there is a misunderstanding apparently. It was the Sabbath. This is one of those uh-oh moments. You kind of think, "Why has John just said this? Why can't we just stop for a minute and have an exciting time wonderfully reflecting on the fact that Jesus knows us and knows our needs and knows our challenges and knows our problems? Why can't we just stop there and just be absolutely purring along as we think about Jesus' compassion towards us and power for us? Why can't we just stop? Why does John have to introduce this thing?" It's a real provocation into the story. "Now it was the Sabbath." That immediately raises a whole series of questions. What are we going to get now? Are we going to get a detailed discussion about what we can or cannot do on the Sabbath day? That's how a Jew reading this would immediately think.

Introducing this is introducing conflict into the story. We learn something about Jesus here, by the way, we learn that sometimes Jesus actually introduces conflict in order that we might learn something about him. Conflict isn't all bad because in conflict, we learn things about Jesus that we don't learn in the normal even flow of our lives. Here in the gospels we find this a lot: Jesus introduces conflict at this point. He did it on the Sabbath. "Jesus, why did you just not wait until Sunday to do this? You would have saved yourself a whole lot of trouble if you'd just done that." But, of course, this is the key, actually the key to the whole event. It was the Sabbath and though we're not going to see this this evening, this is going to provoke the whole of the discussion now that's going to flow from this. In fact, doing it on the Sabbath day is going to get Jesus killed. It's going to get Jesus killed because he provokes it on the Sabbath day.

You see, the big deal is this: "The Jews," that is the authorities, "said to the man who had been healed," verse 10, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your mat." These religious leaders did not object to the miracle, they objected to the mat that the guy was carrying after the miracle. That's just the reality. You see the disjunction here. I mean, really shouldn't they have been thinking to themselves, "Wow, God is great!" No, "Excuse me, no carrying of mats on the Sabbath day." It isn't even in the Bible. They'd made it up themselves.

Well, this Sabbath issue then is raised here and it's raised in a way that keeps the focus not on the discussion of what you can or cannot do on the Sabbath day but rather, keeps the focus on Jesus because Jesus knows quite well what he's done. He's done it deliberately. He's healed a man on the Sabbath day. He's told him to take up his bed. Jesus told him to take up his bed. In doing that, he is deliberately breaking the rules and

regulations of the religious elite. In doing that, he's actually also and they will pick up on this, he is also claiming to be the one who can dictate what we do or don't do on the Sabbath day. That is, he is claiming to be the Lord of the Sabbath. It was quite a radical thing that he's doing that. He knows exactly that he will create conflict and he knows that precisely in this conflict we are going to learn more about him. In fact, there is just a little hint of this and we'll come back to it another time in verse 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." Equal with God. We're going to learn a whole new wealth of things about Jesus out of this miracle.

So, lastly there is a message just in the miracle itself. Look in verses 10-13, "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.'" They asked him, 'Who is the man who said to you, "Take up your bed and walk"?' Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place." Doesn't it surprise you for a moment here, you've been for 38 years and you've not been able to get up off the floor, you've had to have been lifted and laid wherever you went and suddenly you're able to get up, lift up your bed and walk. Wouldn't you think just, maybe it's a Scottish thing, I think I'd want to know who the person was? This man is quite blasé, "I mean, this kind of thing happens every day." He takes up his mat, off he goes and he doesn't even ask who Jesus is. And even if he had wanted to, I think Jesus would have high-tailed it out of there because Jesus did not want to be doing mass miracles that day. He had come there to heal this one man. That's another issue and we'll come back to that in a moment.

So, the man doesn't know who Jesus is and do you notice that when he's confronted about carrying his bed on the Sabbath, what does he do? He blames the man who healed him, "Don't blame me, the guy who healed me told me to do this. I'm just following orders." You notice what's remarkable is, this is important I think to the flow of the story: Jesus healed the man and then disappeared before the man could find out who he was. I think that's the explanation so that's why the man doesn't know who healed him but does that mean that Jesus is finished with this man? Well, if we look at verse 14, we find: no, Jesus was actually going to see this man again because it was Jesus who found the man. Look at verse 14, "Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.'" In other words, Jesus had no intention of healing and running. He was going to speak to the man again but he did not stay there with the crowd. He healed the man and left and then found the man later on in the temple precincts, probably not in the temple itself but in the temple precincts.

He says two things to him, look at the end of verse 13, there was a crowd there, Jesus withdrew because there was a crowd there. Why did he not stay? Well, if he had stayed you can just imagine there would have been a healing frenzy all that day and Jesus had not come to heal everybody. He'd come to heal that one man, that one man. Secondly, in verse 14, Jesus seeks out the man in the temple and tells him that the real issue of the healing is that he should sin no more. "Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.'" Do you

see what Jesus' concern is with this man? He's concerned that this man be holy, that this man have a relationship with God, that this man not simply take this great gift of healing that God has given to him but that this man who is so gifted by Jesus with health now, should now pursue the holy God because something worse than a physical disability all your life might happen which is, of course, what? It is the final judgment. Later on the chapter, Jesus is going to make this point in verse 28, "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." In other words, I have given you this gift of healing so that you become holy, so that you begin to live a God-ward life, a godly life, Jesus says to this man. In other words, the gift of healing for this man was not the end of what Jesus was doing with this man.

I think there are implications for this, aren't there? There are implications for the diseases and the disabilities that we deal with today. Here is Jesus walking through a huge multitude of invalids, verse 3, and he heals one man and then he disappears. And we wonder at that. We wonder why Jesus doesn't heal everybody. The New Testament answers, of course, that when Jesus heals anybody that is a sign and signal to you that there is coming a day in the future when he will raise the dead and he will heal all our diseases because the reality is, all of us are dying in this room, we just don't know the date. Some may die prematurely. Some may live to a great old age. But all of us are dying creatures. "The wages of sin is death." We're all going to die. And though you've had this terrible illness today, if you were healed right at this moment, you'd still die.

But Jesus has come to bring the resurrection and the life and these miracles that he did, sometimes he did heal multitudes of people, sometimes he would be there day after day healing everybody who came to him, everybody who came to him, mass healing just to show that he could do it. But that wasn't what he was here for. Those healings were in the language, I think, of C S. Lewis, like the snow drops. Do we have snow drops here? Do we? I'm just never quite sure. You may call them something else. The snow drops are the heralds of spring. Often the snow drops appear while there is still snow on the ground. They are the heralds of spring and summer to come and the miracles of Jesus are like the snow drops, they are the indicators of the spring and the summer, the resurrection and the life that is to come and he's sparing. That doesn't mean that he doesn't answer prayer for healing today, occasionally he does, but you can't assume it.

He leaves us to wait for that day. This man's response to Jesus' exhortation we find later in the story. Here is Jesus giving them an invitation; he's given them a great gift. He's called them to be holy. This man's response to all of that that Jesus has done for him, do you know what it was? He goes immediately and reports to the authorities, "I know his name now, Jesus of Nazareth." And that's the end, by the way. After verse 13, there's no more about this man. After verse 13, that's it. No more. This man received a great gift of healing from Jesus but he never, never, as far as we can see, came to know Jesus for himself. He had this great exhortation from Jesus, "Go sin no more," but off he went and betrayed the Son of God to the authorities. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine someone having such an amazing gift from the hand of Jesus himself and it have no effect on him. No response of gratitude. No appreciation to Jesus. No sense of

indebtedness to the Lord. No desire to hear what Jesus was saying or to do what Jesus was commanding. Can you imagine a man so indifferent to Jesus personally that he merely spills the beans and tells his identity to the authorities?

You know, that is a particular response to the gospel. That is a response that we expect to see from time-to-time in the hearts of individuals for whom Jesus has done so much and for whom Jesus means so little. I suppose we need to ask ourselves this evening if we fall into that category of person? In the bigger picture of the story, of course, this miracle provokes the authorities and in the end, leads to the understanding that Jesus was making himself equal with God. That should lead us to worship but the story of that man, I think, should make us examine our hearts. Has God given you great gifts? Has God given you great blessings in your life? Has God enriched you in many ways in your life? And have you taken them? Has Jesus spoken to you? Challenged you? Exhorted you? Admonished you? Directed you? But you've ignored him? You've taken the gift and denied Jesus.

What a frightening thing. There is something much worse than being an invalid for 38 years, it's living without Jesus and facing eternity without Jesus. May God give us the grace to avoid that, to embrace him and to receive all his good gifts with grateful praise and with a joyful heart and with a fervent spirit.

Let's pray together.

*Father, we pray that you would please take your word and write it in our hearts. We pray for each other. We pray that you would keep us close to you, feeding on you, feeding on Christ in our hearts by faith. We ask this in Jesus' strong name. Amen.*