

John 5:1-15 The Man From Haven Heals on the Sabbath

Today I will be talking about priorities - our priorities and God's priorities. Let's start with a prayer, that God might help us focus: Heavenly Father, guide our minds and our hearts, so that we aren't off track, but prioritise you today. Amen. You may need your Bibles open for this talk, and there's a sermon outline in the handout. If you do have the handout, please draw a little arrow to swap the last two points.

Once when I used to work in a petrol station, I was training a new employee on the midnight shift. Some time in the middle of the night, a large, scary looking man came in - with a big beard, shaved head, tattoos all up his arms - and started microwaving chicken sandwiches, eating one while loading the rest into a plastic bag. Then, bold as brass, he went to walk out the door without paying for them. Before he could, I pressed a button under the counter that locked the front door, so he couldn't leave. And then he went mental. He yelled and screamed and told me to let him out, because he was already on CCTV and the cops could just catch him later. I calmly approached him (calm on the outside, I was so afraid!) and told him that he could keep the sandwich he was eating, as we obviously couldn't sell that, but he needed to give me the other microwave chicken sandwiches, because they didn't belong to him. He looked at me as if I was crazier than him, and then after a moment gave me the bag full of sandwiches. I let him out, and he left the store.

Shortly after this, my new trainee asked me, "Is that what we're expected to do?" The answer, of course, is no! A petrol station attendant is not expected to put their life at risk for the sake of a microwave chicken sandwich. Or anything else, for that matter. At the time, I thought I was doing the right thing, but in reality I had made a stupid mistake. I had made some chicken sandwiches more important than my own safety. I had the wrong priorities, and I didn't even realise until a trainee pointed it out to me!

Right from the beginning of the series we heard that John didn't record everything Jesus did, but rather had a very clear purpose in recording certain acts of Jesus - 20:31 "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." This act of Jesus that John records in chapter 5:1-15 is all about showing us that Jesus follows God's priorities. As Christians, we have to make sure that our priorities match up with God's priorities. We can all have the wrong priorities - both by misunderstanding God's priorities, or going so far as to ignore them.

We can see God's priorities by looking at Jesus. Jesus learns of a man who has been crippled for 38 years and, because he cares about his physical wellbeing, Jesus heals him. Being healed allowed the man to go back to the temple - crippled people were barred otherwise. It's no accident that the next time Jesus meets this man, it is in the temple. So not only does Jesus heal him, but he restores his relationship with God's people. When he meets the man again, Jesus tells him that the consequences of sin are even worse than a lifetime of crippling disability, so he must deal with his sin problem, and so expresses concern for his eternal spiritual welfare. Jesus's priorities are for this man's wellbeing: physical and relational and spiritual. Jesus looks for the person who is really in need - the person who is really broken - and helps them.

Jesus is showing God's priorities. God loves people and wants to fix their problems. God promises us he will take away all sickness, suffering and pain. God promises to bring people into relationship with himself and with each other as a community. God really cares for

people who are really broken, who really need him. That alone is enough for us to see that Jesus is the Son of God and believe in him. But that is true for any healing that Jesus performed. As always, when we look at the gospel of John, we see that he goes even deeper. And we see that when we realise that Jesus is willing to face persecution and death at the hands of his enemies to demonstrate and pursue God's priorities.

Now you might think, Why would anyone want to persecute someone whose priorities are caring for a broken person's physical, relational and spiritual wellbeing? And yet they do. We read about it in the verse just after our reading: "So because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him." This act of Jesus involves more than just Jesus and the crippled man. So let's look at the other people in our story: the Jewish leaders.

In the passage today, the wrong priorities are perfectly illustrated by the questions the Jewish leaders ask the ex-crippled man. If I wanted to be generous to them, I would say that they were trying to help everyone live a life of holiness to attract God's salvation. If I wanted to be harsh on them, I would say they were using God's laws to make life more comfortable for themselves. As we read the gospels, the truth seems to fall somewhere in the middle. The Jewish leaders at the time thought that if people kept God's laws, maybe God would drive out their Roman dictators and set them free. But they also wanted to wield political power over others to benefit themselves. In this way they misunderstood God's priorities of how people come to God, and they ignored God's priorities by focusing on their own comfort. Both are wrong, and both are traps we can just as easily fall into.

The first thing they say is, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat." That's not actually true. What the Jewish leaders did was establish a set of rules that boxed in God's own laws - laws to stop people from breaking laws. By boxing in God's laws with other laws, they sought to stop people from sinning so as to attract God's salvation. Plus, when the Jewish leaders made up rules like "Don't carry your mat on the Sabbath," they then enforced them by excluding people from coming to the Temple. That made them powerful! It made them important people, and they liked it.

The man gives his answer, which is essentially "Some guy healed me, and he told me to carry my mat, so I did."

Now what did the Jewish leaders ask? "Who told you to pick it up and walk?" Not "Who healed you, who made you well, who is performing such a remarkable miracle?" But, "Who told you to pick it up, who told you to break our laws? Who is challenging our authority?" Again, the Jewish leaders had the wrong priorities. Their priority is finding out who is telling people to break their rules (stopping them from being saved); and who is challenging their authority (their power and importance they love so much).

The Jewish leaders had made up laws, and they wanted people to follow those laws. And just like the Jewish leaders, as a Christian community we can sometimes make up laws to box in people's relationship with God. We use these rules to draw a line between what's right and what's wrong, so we can point to (usually someone else's) actions and say, "That's wrong." We draw these lines for lots of reasons, but ultimately it usually comes down to the same two reasons the Jewish leaders had: we think laws will bring people to God; and we want power over others because our rules make us comfortable.

And both reasons are based on wrong priorities. We are mistaken about God's priorities, and we just plain ignore them. As I said, both of these things can exist together. Let's start with when we ignore God's priorities. This is sin itself. There's no positive intent in this. It is all about making ourselves more comfortable. It is selfish.

Making up rules is a way of making clear lines between good and bad. And that makes us comfortable, because it means not only do we now know what's right and wrong, but we also get to say what's right and wrong. You can usually tell when we are doing this for our own comfort, because we draw lines that make actions we would never take really black and white, while we make sins we might commit rather more grey and fuzzy.

Look at how the western Church treats greed - an actual sin, not something we made up. On Tuesday I was sitting next to a Christian woman at the doctor. She goes to church, runs a bible study in her home, and loves God. She was complaining that her \$2000 gold watch was running slow. The western church is very good at thinking that someone who spends \$2000 on a watch isn't greedy. We can't judge them for wasting money on an utter extravagance when there are people in their church who live on less than that a month and struggle to pay their rent. We're good at being non-judgmental when it comes to greed. We're very cautious. We consider that we don't know the whole story. We don't know how much the person gives to church and Christian causes. We don't know what their own conscience is like. We don't know the background or the circumstances. We are very, very careful.

But how do we treat people who smoke cigarettes? Who wear clothes that show too much skin? Who gamble? Who vote for the Greens? It's so easy to point at them and say, "That's wrong!" But these aren't God's rules; they're our rules. And our rules are to do with our comfort zones. We try and tie them into God's laws - you cannot carry your mat on the Sabbath. You can probably think of other examples of things we rail against because they make us uncomfortable. Someone goes and watches an MA15+ rated movie full of swearing and violence like Deadpool, and we can furrow our brows and tut our fingers. Someone takes a holiday and flies business class, and we say, "Ooh, that must have been nice."

Don't get me wrong. Rich does not equal greedy, and I'm not calling on us to be more judgmental of people because of their wealth or their greed. I'm saying we need to be less judgmental of people whose actions and activities we are uncomfortable with. We know how to do it with greed - we need to learn how to do it with everything, and especially things that aren't God's rules, but rather middle class cultural rules.

Tony Campolo, spiritual advisor to US President Bill Clinton, once said to a big Christian conference: "1) Last night 30,000 kids died of starvation or diseases stemming from malnutrition. 2) None of you give a <BEEEP>. 3) You all care more about the fact that I just said <BEEEP> than the fact that I just said 30,000 kids died." I don't have the guts to read out that quote uncensored, because I know the moment I swear in church, there are people who will be so distracted by it they won't hear anything else I have to say. But if we care more about swear words than about kids dying, we plainly have the wrong priorities!

Now sometimes there's more to it. Sometimes someone's sin hurts us, or someone we love. It seems unfair to talk about that as if it is mere discomfort. Sometimes the pain of sin is not just the loss of a comfy chair; it's torture and betrayal and loss. And so, in pain, we lash out. I understand that, and so does God. But that doesn't make it right. Even in the midst of pain, we must still pursue God's priorities. Torture and betrayal and loss are what Jesus

experienced on the cross because of other people's sin. And he sought to fulfill God's priorities in looking after broken people on that cross! Keeping Jesus free from suffering was not God's priority. Jesus died precisely for those who caused him pain. And we are called to love others - not because they're lovely, but because we love God, and that's his priority.

Now let's move on to mistaking God's priorities by thinking we are bringing people closer to God.

I want to make it clear, it's not wrong to tell people how to live holy lives. I have no problem with telling people that something is against God's will - I do it every time I preach. And there is nothing wrong with telling someone that their sin is an obstacle between them getting to God. Of course it is! We can never get to God on our own - that's the gospel! The mistake comes when we start telling people that their sin is an obstacle between God getting to them. That is wrong! Nothing is an obstacle between God getting to us! God overcomes sin! God does away with sin! God destroys sin! That's why Jesus came - to save the lost! To quote Jesus from another gospel, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Sinners are the ones Jesus came for!

I think we tell ourselves we're good at recognising this gospel truth. We say we understand God's grace. We think we wouldn't make a mistake like that. Of course someone's good works don't lead to their salvation. But then we see someone in our church commit a certain kind of sin, and it's like we lose our minds. "They call themselves a Christian? They shouldn't be sinning! They must be backsliding! They mustn't really be saved!" But that's the mistake! Christians *are* sinners. If we're not, why do we do a confession at church every week? Why confess if we don't have any sins to confess? If you say those words every week, and you mean them, but then you judge another Christian because they have sinned, you're a hypocrite. And if I then judge you for being a hypocrite, I'm a hypocrite. My point is not to judge people who are judgmental, but rather to point out that we're all sinners! Living more holy lives is a great way to love God. But it's a terrible way to solve our sin problem. We can only rely on God in Christ Jesus for that.

God's priority in caring for people's physical, relational and spiritual wellbeing is not reliant on our ability to live holy lives, so we don't need to worry about regulating other people's lives to make sure they are holy enough for God. If we prioritise their knowing and loving God and his care for them - God's priorities - a transformed life will follow for them, but not all at once. That's God's promise.

If we are complaining that sinners are coming to church, we're very close to the Jewish leaders complaining that Jesus heals cripples on the Sabbath, and we are outside God's priorities. And if we start judging people because they're breaking our rules, we're doing so because they are challenging an authority we don't have, and we're outside God's priorities. God makes the rules, not us. Jesus showed us he is God's son by healing on the Sabbath. We should be following God's priorities of loving broken people, meeting their physical, relational and spiritual needs, and giving them every opportunity to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that by believing they may have life in his name.