

## **JESUS' HOUSE OF MERCY** **(John 5:1-15)**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this settlement was little more than a crossroads. It had a blacksmith shop, a church meeting house that doubled as a schoolhouse, a smattering of homes, and a store or two. In 1910 it became a key stopping point for the B&O Railroad. In time, suburbanization took over, and today it boasts a population of over 63,000. It is one of the most affluent and highly educated communities in America. It sits outside of our nation's capital, but it is still in the beltway. It is home to the National Institute of Health, as well as the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

The settlement didn't get its eventual name until 1871 when the postmaster, Robert Franck, borrowed the name of the Presbyterian Church that had been built there in 1820. The church was called Bethesda Meeting House. Today, we know that vibrant, sprawling community as Bethesda, Maryland.

But where did the church get its name? They got it from the same place that 21 towns and cities across the world got it (14 of those places are in the United States), and the same place that Bethesda Church in south OKC got its name, as well as numerous other churches.

The name comes from today's text. In our text, Bethesda was not a city. It was not a church. It was a pool, not really a swimming pool, maybe more like a wading pool. Let's read John 5:1-15.

The name *Bethesda* was originally an Aramaic word. In Aramaic, as in Hebrew, the word *beth* means "house."

- Bethel means "house of God."
- Bethlehem means "house of bread."
- Bethsaida, a small fishing village on the northern shore of Lake Galilee meant, appropriately, "house of fishing."
- Bethany, where Lazarus and his sisters lived, meant "house of poverty."
- Bethesda means "house of mercy."

Bethesda, house of mercy, is a great place to locate a military hospital. It is appropriate that men wounded in war are taken from the front line and sent to the house of mercy to recover. Bethesda, house of mercy, is a great name for a gospel-preaching church. You and I are engaged in a spiritual conflict, a spiritual war. We face an unseen enemy who means to do us harm. The church is to be a house of mercy where the wounded are welcomed, where the sick and injured can be cared for and nurtured back to health.

Is Liberty Southern Baptist Church a house of mercy? I pray that we are, and if we are not, that we become that. May we never be a house of judgment, or a house of gossip, or a house of discord. May we ever be a house of mercy.

I submit to you that although the Bethesda in our text was called a house of mercy, it wasn't really. Yes. It was a place where the sick and infirm gathered. They came looking for healing. A legend had arisen saying that whenever the water, stirred, it was being stirred by an angel, and the first person to get into the water after the water was stirred

would be healed of whatever malady he or she had.

It is quite likely that the pool had been made by an under-ground spring. The water wasn't being stirred by an angel. It was being stirred by the bubbling up of that underground spring. Regardless, people believed the legend, and so they came hoping for healing.

Thus, the pool was not a place of mercy. It was a place of competition. It was all about who could get there first and claim the prize. For the man who had been paralyzed for 38 years, this was not a place of mercy. It was a place of broken dreams. It was a place of repeated disappointment. The man testified that he had no one to help get down into the water. He was paralyzed. He had to drag himself to the edge of the pool. That was a slow, arduous task. Someone always beat him into the pool. He had not experienced mercy at this pool. He had known only heartache there.

Bethesda only became a true house of mercy with the arrival of Jesus. It was only when Jesus came on the scene that the unnamed man who had suffered for so long finally experienced real, genuine mercy.

So, too, a church only becomes a house of mercy when Jesus is obviously present. Apart from the presence of Jesus, a church may call itself a house of mercy. It may promote and advertise itself as being a healing home for the hurting, but that healing will be elusive, and that mercy will be lacking.

For this church to be the house of mercy our community needs, for us to be the house of mercy God wants us to be, Jesus must be present.

Let me take a moment to clarify what I mean when I say *church*. We routinely use the word *church* inaccurately and mistakenly. Think first about what the church is not. The church is not a building. If I am at home and I tell my wife, "Honey, I am going to walk over to the church," I have just reduced the church to a building. Liberty Southern is not a building. We simply meet in a building. We worship in a building. We use this building for fellowship and prayer and instruction, but we are not a physical structure.

Not only is the church not a building, also, the church is not an event. If someone were to ask you, "What is Liberty Southern going to do at 11:00 on Sunday?" You just might answer, "We are going to have church." No. We are going to worship, and pray, and sing, and testify, and proclaim God's word, but those things do not constitute church.

So, if church is not a building, and if it is not an event, what is church? It is us. We are the church. Every Sunday morning, we are the church gathered, and when we leave this place, we are the church scattered. At all times, we are the church. For us to be a house of mercy, we must have Jesus living in us and reigning supreme over us.

From our text, I want to give you four, wonderful truths about Jesus' House of Mercy.

### **Jesus' House of Mercy Is Where the Sick Come and Congregate**

Look again at vv. 2-3. Bethesda, the place that was meant to be a house of mercy, was the place where Jerusalem's sick and disabled would gather. This wasn't the place for the city's beautiful people. You wouldn't find the up and in at the pool of Bethesda, only the down and out. These were the ones the doctors couldn't heal, the ones that medicine couldn't help. They needed a miracle. If only the water would be stirred, if only they could get in first, maybe they would get that miracle they so desperately needed.

Churches are a bit like that. We exist for sick people who need a miracle  
Max Lucado commented on this passage. He wrote:

This story isn't about an invalid in Jerusalem. This story is about you. It's about me. The fellow isn't nameless. He has a name—yours. He has a face—mine. He has a problem—just like ours.

You may be holding this book with healthy hands and reading with strong eyes, and you can't imagine what you and this four-decade invalid have in common. How could he be you?

There is a common denominator that links us with that paralytic—sin. We will get to it later, but at the end of the story, Jesus said to the man, “Sin no more.” That could be translated, “Quit sinning.” The man had a sin problem; so do you, and so do I.

Where we meet, wherever that might be, should be a place where the sick come and congregate. This place should be a safe place where you unwrap your bandages and reveal your wounds and your sores without fear of someone pointing a finger in your direction and saying, “Look at him! Look at her! Look how sick that person is.” We are all sick. We are all in need of healing. We are all in varying stages of recovery.

When I pastored on Grand Lake, for a few months we borrowed one of those portable signs. We put it out on the front lawn of the church by the highway where motorists could read it. I once put on that sign the following message: “This church is segregated. Sinners only.”

If you are not a sinner, if you have reached some state of sinless perfection, this church isn't for you. You don't belong here. If you have somehow reached some heavenly state of purity where you no longer sin, we are only going to succeed in polluting you. You need to find another church, but good luck finding it. This church is made up of sick people, and we are here for sick people who need healing.

Liberty Southern is Jesus' house of mercy where the sick come and congregate. Welcome. Notice also . . .

### **Jesus' House of Mercy Is for Those Who Want to Be Made Well**

Why did this paralyzed man and all those other sick people spend day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year by the side of that pool? They hoped they one day they would be the first into pool when the water was stirred, and they would be miraculously healed.

That was their original intent, anyway. I suspect that after a while, it just became a way of life. They were there by force of habit. That is just what they did every day. Every day they went to the pool of Bethesda. After 38 years, surely this man didn't really hold out hope that he would be healed.

Here comes Jesus, and He asks the man a question. You might think it was a foolish question.

You may have heard your teacher say in school, “There is no such thing as a dumb question.” Well, she was just being polite. There are some real doozies out there. Here are some really, dumb questions that were asked online:

- Should I tell my parents that I'm adopted?
- Does it take 18 months for twins to be born or just 9?
- Do you think NASA invented thunderstorms to cover up the sound of space battles?
- Why are the holes in cats' fur always in the right places for their eyes?
- How far of a drive is it from Miami to Florida?
- Are chickens considered animals or birds?
- Does looking at a picture of the sun hurt your eyes?

Jesus is talking to a man who is waiting by the side of a pool that can supposedly heal people, and Jesus asks him if he wants to get well. On the surface, that might seem like a dumb question. I think it was a brilliant question.

I am convinced there are some handicapped people who don't really want to get well. Secretly, they enjoy the attention they receive. They are pleased that nothing much is expected of them. Quite possibly, some sick people don't really want to get well. Some unemployed people don't really want a job; collecting unemployment is just fine with them. Some people don't want to be delivered from their addiction.

It may also be true that while some are first drawn to worship and the ministry of the church because they hope to get well, after time some forget about all about that, and church attendance becomes a thing of habit; it's just what they do on Sunday. They are not longer looking for a miracle to occur in their lives.

When you attend worship on Sunday, do you really expect anything of significance to happen? Do you expect someone's life to be changed, possibly yours?

Or do you attend worship because you have always done that? It wouldn't seem like Sunday if you didn't.

If you listen closely, you just might hear the Holy Spirit whispering to you, "Do you want to get well?"

This house of mercy is for those who want to be made well. Are you willing to be made uncomfortable? Are you willing to leave that lifestyle you have grown accustomed to and to let Jesus work a miracle in your life? If you are, I have some good news for you . . .

### **Jesus' House of Mercy Is Where the Great Physician Does His Work**

While in Jerusalem on a sabbath day, Jesus entered the pool called Bethesda and did a great work of healing. In this passage, I find two specific works that Jesus does.

#### *1. Jesus Does His Work of Ministry.*

We often refer to Jesus as the Great Physician. Now, there is not a single verse in the Bible that specifically identifies Jesus as the Great Physician, but there are plenty of verses and passages that portray Jesus as one who cares, and the one who heals, and the one who has the power to bring us to a state of health and wholeness.

I find it interesting that in this story, Jesus singled this one paralyzed man out of the

crowd who had gathered. This man didn't approach Jesus; Jesus approached the man. In His great mercy, Jesus comes to those who would never come to Him on their own.

In the 1970's there was a bumper sticker that was popular among those in the Christian community. The bumper sticker proclaimed, "I've found it." I don't know who came up with that slogan, but I sure hope he wasn't a Southern Baptist because it communicates terrible theology.

In contrast, our hymns usually promote good theology. One of the great hymns of our faith is "Amazing Grace." You know the lyrics: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I've found it . . ." No. No. That's not what it says. It reads, "I once was lost but now am found."

If you are a believer, it is not because you found Jesus; it is because He found you. Lost sheep don't find the shepherd. The shepherd finds lost sheep. The longest chapter in the Bible is Psalm 119. In the last verse of that psalm the psalmist prays, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant."

If you want the Great Physician or the Great Shepherd to find you, it is helpful to go to a place where you can easily be found.

Here in America, when an expectant mother is about to give birth, she doesn't ask her husband to go look for the doctor. He simply takes her to the hospital, and the doctor finds her.

Just as a doctor will employ his or her skills at an office or a hospital, Jesus often chooses to do His work of healing in the context of a church because that is where the sick gather, and that is where He will find those who want to be made well. If you really want to be made well, then church should become important to you because that is where the Great Physician often does His work.

## *2. Jesus Does His Work of Modeling.*

Interestingly, this chapter doesn't mention the presence of Jesus' disciples. Most often they were with Him. It would be quite odd if they were not there. Quite likely, the were and John just didn't mention their presence because his focus was on Jesus, not on the disciples.

Regardless, the disciples closely watched their Rabbi as He taught and as He healed. They were His students. He taught and they learned as they kept a listening ear and an observant eye on what Jesus said and did.

We, too, are Jesus' students, and we can learn as we carefully read and consider what Jesus did and how He did it. In this passage, Jesus models a couple of things for us to do as we minister to those He brings to us.

First, He teaches us to not to try to make a name for ourselves. Look at vv. 12-13. Don't you think it is quite amazing that even though Jesus healed this man, the man had no idea who it was who healed him?

If Jesus had ministered the way we do, He would have said: "Now remember, my name is Jesus. You spell that J-E-S-U-S. There's a lot of Jesus' running around; so, to be specific, I am Jesus from Nazareth. Here's my card. Here's several cards. Give them to your friends. Pass them around. Tell them what Jesus of Nazareth did for you."

Jesus didn't do that. He never did that. He is telling us, "Don't worry about getting

headlines or getting credit. Just do what you can to help the people I send your way.”

In addition to modeling that, Jesus also expressly taught that. Look at Matthew 6:1-4.

We could view the Church as a teaching hospital. Not only are the sick being helped, but we are being trained in the art of helping as we observe the Great Physician at work.

In addition to not trying to make a name for ourselves, Jesus models a second truth: Do what you can. Jesus didn’t heal everyone at the pool of Bethesda. He healed just one man. Sometimes we enter situations where the need is so great that we feel it is beyond our capacity to make a difference. By healing this one man, Jesus is saying, “You don’t have to try to fix everybody. Just do what you can. Don’t let what you can’t do keep you from doing what you can do.”

With that in mind, I challenge you to find one person this week whom you can minister to in the name of Jesus.

I read a story about a powerful, coastal storm in which thousands of starfish were washed up on the beach. A little boy walked along the seashore, and as he went, he threw starfish back into the water.

An older man caught up with the boy. The gentleman spoke to the lad. He pointed out the starfish that dotted the beach as far as the eye could see. He said, “Son, what you are doing is great, but frankly, it’s not going to make much of a difference.”

The boy picked up another starfish. He said, “Maybe not.” Then, as he threw the little starfish back into the ocean he added, “But it sure made a difference for that one.”

You and I live in a world of great need. We are not going to reach everybody, but we can make an eternal difference in the lives of some. Don’t let what you can’t do keep you from doing what you can do.

Finally . . .

## **Jesus’ House of Mercy Is the Starting Point for a Changed Life**

From the moment the lame man met Jesus, his life was forever changed. He got a new lease on life.

In 1988, I became a chaplain at Integris Baptist Medical Center in OKC. That was 35 years ago. Between then and now I have met literally hundreds of people who had life-changing and even life-sparing operations. I have met patients who were given the gift of life. I have met both men and women who died and were brought back to life. Many of those individuals face life with a new focus and a new appreciation.

I once spoke with a pastor who narrowly avoided a heart attack. He had a 90% clogged artery that was fortunately discovered and attended to before he had a massive, coronary event. He said that his lifestyle and diet are going to change. He said he is going to work one job instead of two, and he claimed he is going to eat food that is cholesterol-free, fat-free, and taste-free.

Likewise, when Jesus touches your life, your life is going to be different. How? How is it going to change? Look at the man in our story. Consider what Jesus said to him.

Notice what Jesus said to the man in v. 11. The man was lame. Everywhere he went, he had to have people carry him. Now, instead of requiring people to carry the him on his bed, the man was to get up and carry his own bed.

When Jesus changes your life, it is time to carry your own weight. There are times in

life when we need people to help us carry our burdens, but then there are times we need to just suck it up and carry our own load. Wise is the one who knows what time it is.

When you do start taking responsibility for your own life, some people aren't going to like it. Look at v. 10. It is sad to say, but some of your worst critics just might be religious folk. They might be offended when they see you up and about doing something that doesn't fit into their framework of how things are to be done. Don't let them douse your flame. Keep on keeping on.

Later on, Jesus had another word for the man in our story. Look at v. 14. Jesus first rejoiced with the man in his healing. Then, Jesus issued the man a word of caution. He said, "Sin no more." He was saying, "It is time for your lifestyle to change."

The takeaway for us is that the moral quality of our lives should be better once we encounter Jesus. It is true that we won't completely conquer sin this side of heaven, but we must do whatever we need to do to keep sin from completely conquering us.

The starting point for this change is Jesus' house of mercy, and His house of mercy is the Church.

Jesus thought the Church was important, so much so that He shed His blood for the Church. When Jesus comes back, He is coming back for His Bride, His Church.

I appeal to you, let this place and let this people be your starting point for a changed life. Commit or recommit your life to Christ, and make His house of mercy an integral part of that new life.