

Jesus Challenges Spiritual indifference

John 5:1-15

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Introduction

I've never been a massive fan of tough love, but I can see the wisdom behind it. Sometimes we need a sharp word to jolt us out of apathy. Like a stubborn animal that won't budge, we need a firm shove to get us moving.

Why do I say this? Well, Jesus was an incredibly gentle man, but he also wasn't afraid to deliver a hard truth when it was needed. We see that in our passage for today. Jesus says, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." Jesus gives this man a hard-hitting warning to challenge his indifference, and I pray that this challenge will also give us food for thought.

But before we consider Jesus' challenge for ourselves, let's unpack the passage that was read to us. So, if you have a Bible with you, it would be good to keep it open at John 5.

Story

So, Jesus is in Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals and, whilst he's there, he decides to visit a pool called Bethesda. Archaeologists have actually uncovered this pool which is a wonderful reminder that we are dealing with real history, not myth and legend.

But what's so special about this pool? Well, the popular belief at the time was that this pool could heal people. People believed that an angel would come down every so often to stir the water in the pool. And when this happened, whoever got into the water first would be cured of whatever disease they had. That's why we're told a great number of disabled people are lying around the pool; they're waiting for the water to be stirred and then they're hoping that they can get in before anyone else.

John then introduces us to one of these disabled people. Verse 5 says, 'One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.' I can't begin to imagine this man's suffering and frustration. Losing the use of his legs would have affected every area of his life. As we know from other Bible stories, he would have to be carried to wherever he wanted to go. I doubt he would have been able to work, and he probably relied on other people for almost everything. And he's been in this condition for 38 years.

Jesus learns about this man's condition and approaches him. And he asks him what seems like a ridiculous question. Jesus asks him, "Do you want to get well?" And we're thinking, "Of course the man wants to be healed!" But how does the man respond? In verse 7 he says, 'Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.'

In his answer, the man reveals how bleak his situation is, but Jesus also draws out his true attitude. This man has suffered so long that he's become indifferent to his condition. Yes, he's waiting by the pool because a small part of him hopes that someone will come along to help but Jesus has literally asked him if he wants to get well and he doesn't say, "Yes." And Jesus' question clearly implies that he's willing to help but the man doesn't take up Jesus' offer. He could say, "Yes, please can you help me into the pool next time the water is stirred?" Instead, he complains about his lack of help. As a man who is not very good at reaching out for help, I do sympathise with him, and I'm told by a psychologist that it's normal for people suffering from chronic illnesses to think this way so we shouldn't think too harshly of him at this point.

Besides, Jesus doesn't. Jesus isn't put off by his indifference. In fact, it prompts him to act right away. He overlooks the man's complaint and moves straight onto the process of healing him. He says to the man, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." Again, this seems like a ridiculous statement, but Jesus commonly healed people by commanding them to perform an action. Take the man with the shrivelled hand in Mark 3. Jesus says to him "Stretch out your hand," and we read, 'He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.' To obey commands like these, the recipient has to take a step of faith that Jesus will enable them to do what he's asked them to do. This paralysed man would have to try and use muscles that he knows don't work if he is going to get up and walk.

And, amazingly, despite his indifference, the man does obey Jesus' command. And he gets up, he picks up his mat, and he walks. In a flash, Jesus has completely healed this man's decades-long disability. This is a life-changing moment.

So far, this is a wonderful story. Jesus draws near a man who had lost almost all hope, takes what little faith he has and rejuvenates his life. You would expect his indifference to disappear and be replaced with joy and gratitude. But that's not how the story continues.

The healed man then bumps into the Jewish leaders who have an issue with him carrying his mat. They accuse him of supposedly breaking their rules about the Sabbath. To which, the healed man gives a remarkably matter-of-fact response. 'But he replied, 'The man who made me well said to me, "Pick up your mat and walk."' (v11). He just tells them how it is. He doesn't seem to express any joy in his healing. If anything, there's a slightly defensive air about his reply. He's almost saying, "Well, what would you do if you were paralysed for 38 years and a man tells you to pick your mat and walk?"

So, the Jewish leaders follow up on this. 'So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?"' (v12). But this healed man has no idea who Jesus is. Yes, Jesus slipped away but if you were healed of a 38-year condition, you would want to know who healed you, right? You'd try to follow them or find out more about them. But this man doesn't seem to show any interest in who Jesus is.

Compare his response to the blind man in John 9. Jesus heals a blind man one Sabbath, so he is also approached by the Jewish leaders, and this is how he responds: “You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” (John 9:30-33). This previously-blind man has meditated on what sort of person could open eyes that have been shut since birth, and he concludes that person must come from God. In contrast, our previously-paralysed man seems indifferent to Jesus. Despite being healed of a 38-year condition, he hasn’t given much thought to who could perform such a miracle.

Sometime later, the man goes to the temple, and this is where Jesus catches up with him. And Jesus has an extremely bold challenge for him. In verse 14, Jesus says, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” Jesus reveals that this physical healing had a spiritual intention. We may think that the worst thing that could ever happen to us is a decades-long illness. But Jesus says actually the consequences of sin are far worse. If this man does not deal with his sin, he will suffer something much worse than his 38-year paralysis. We are, of course, talking about hell. This man may have been indifferent about receiving physical healing, but Jesus is saying that he cannot be indifferent about his spiritual life because there are dire consequences.

How does the man respond to Jesus’ warning? Uncomfortably, we don’t know. Even in his final report to the Jewish leaders, the healed man neither praises nor condemns Jesus. His body may have changed, but his attitude hasn’t. It seems his indifference has carried over into his spiritual life.

Three Challenges to Spiritual Indifference

It’s a sobering story and it’s ambiguous ending forces us into this man’s shoes. We might not know how he responds to Jesus’ warning, but we can make sure that we do respond. Because Christians and non-Christians alike can suffer from spiritual indifference, though in slightly different ways.

Some non-Christians will reject God completely, but others will just be indifferent towards him; they’re just not really interested in him or Christianity. Whereas Christians aren’t likely to be indifferent towards Christianity, but they might be indifferent towards one specific area of the Christian life. And I think the challenges that Jesus gives this man are especially relevant to our attitude towards evangelism.

So, here are three challenges to spiritual indifference that Jesus offers this man and for us to reflect on today.

Challenge #1: Sin Matters

This is the opening punch of Jesus’ challenge. “Stop sinning.” Literally, do not continue to sin. Sin matters to Jesus, but before we dive into why sin matters, what is sin?

You may have come across this acrostic poem before, I think it's a fantastically simple and human definition of sin. "Shove off, God. I'm in charge. Not you." I want to choose what's right and wrong and I'm not listening to whatever God says. An author put it this way, 'The heart of sin is the rejection of the living God.'¹ I do what I want and not what God wants. So, sin can take many forms all the way from murder and adultery to unkind words and lies. But the central idea is disobeying and rejecting God and his instructions which we find in the Bible.

Now why does this matter? Well, simply, because sin has consequences. Jesus continues, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." And as I've already said, this is a reference to hell. Jesus is warning this man that his sin will eventually send him to hell.

Now God didn't design hell for us. We read in Matthew 25:41 that Jesus says, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." It's not a place God wants to send anyone. Peter writes that 'he is patient with [us], not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance' (2 Peter 3:9). But he would not be a good and just God if he let evil go unpunished. A child who is repeatedly and deliberately difficult is warned about their behaviour and then given a timeout or sent to the bottom of the stairs, as it was for me and my siblings. In a similar way, if we keep deliberately disobeying God and the good standard he has set, then we should be punished.

So how do we stop sinning? That's what Jesus tells the man to do, and we don't want to go to hell, so how do we do it? I imagine most of us are thinking, "It's not possible! I know I won't go the rest of my life without disobeying God." And then there's another problem. What about our past sin? Even if we never do anything wrong ever again, God has to deal with everything wrong we've already done. A new start isn't going to cut it. It would be like making a New Year's resolution to stop gossiping, which is a great decision, but that won't undo all our gossip from last year. We need a permanent clean slate that deals with past, present and future sin.

And thankfully, that's what Jesus offers us. Hebrews 9:27-28 says, 'Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.'

This was the purpose of the cross. Sin had to be punished so Jesus took the sins of the world on himself, sacrificed himself on the cross, and received their punishment in our place. By sacrificing himself on the cross, Jesus essentially jumped in front of a bullet for us.

But this sacrifice is not automatically applied to us. Like the man in our story, God expects us to respond to Jesus' question. Do you want to get well? Do you want your

¹ From *Intentional* by Paul Williams.

sins taken away? If your answer is yes then, incredibly, all we have to do is believe. John 3:16 says, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' Jesus died to pay for our sins, then he rose from the dead and ascended to heaven where he is waiting now to appear that second time and take those who believe in him to eternal life in the celebration of heaven, a far cry from the punishment of hell.

So, if you are not a Christian and you're indifferent to God, I hope it's clear that you cannot be indifferent to sin. The ultimate consequence of sin is irreversible once you're there. So please consider Jesus' warning, believe in him today, and have your sins taken away by his death on the cross.

If you are a Christian, Jesus' example here should remind us that we cannot take sin out of our gospel message. We need to warn unbelievers of the ultimate consequence of sin. Maybe they need a strong word like Jesus gives here, or maybe they need a gentle push in the right direction. Either way, we do this with complete compassion knowing we too are sinners saved by the death of Jesus. But we also do it with confidence knowing that Jesus saved this sinner, so he can save that sinner too.

Challenge #2: Hell is Awful

I know we don't like to talk about hell, but Jesus raises an extremely important distinction that we should remember regularly. Hell is an awful place.

There is a popular but incorrect belief that hell is like a giant party filled with all the fun things that Christians hate. But that's not what the Bible says hell is like and that's not what Jesus says hell is like.

In Mark 9, Jesus says, "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched" (v47-48). And in Matthew 13, he says, "The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v41-42).

Now I don't know Jesus is speaking literally but the picture Jesus paints is of hell as an eternal experience of pain and regret. So, Jesus is not exaggerating when he says that hell is worse than 38 years of paralysis. If anything, Jesus' warning is a bit of an understatement.

So, if you are not a Christian, and you've ever thought, "I don't need to believe in God because hell won't be that bad," please squash that thought. Hell is awful. You do not want to go there.

And I don't want you to go there. We Christians also need to squash any thought that hell isn't as bad as Jesus says it is. We don't want the unbelievers around us to experience this, and this is why we need to hear how awful hell is. Nothing will break

through our evangelistic indifference as sharply as the thought that a loved one might go to hell. I don't think I will ever forget this quote I read in a book about evangelism. 'Without Christ, they are only a breath away from coming face to face with God and spending eternity without him.'² So, remember that hell is awful and let that drive you to pray for those who don't believe in Jesus, to share the cross of Christ with them, and to show them God's love in your own love towards them.

Hell is not a subject that can or should be avoided. But praise the Lord again that he delights to save sinners.

Challenge #3: God Wants Us

So, there are 2 negative challenges (sin matters and hell is awful) but let me finish with an immensely positive one. God wants us.

Did you notice how many times Jesus takes the initiative in this story? Jesus goes to the pool. Jesus notices the man and learns about his condition. Jesus approaches the man and asks if he wants to get well. Jesus overlooks his indifference, commands him to walk, and then enables him to walk. Then Jesus goes and finds him later and warns him about his indifference. Jesus *pursues* him.

And this isn't just the attitude of Jesus towards one man but the attitude of God to all people. In Luke 15, Jesus tells 3 parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and 2 lost sons. Each of these parables are about God's desire to save unbelievers and, in each parable, the lost items are pursued.

Verse 4 says, "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?" Verse 8 says, "Suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?" Then, in the parable of the lost sons, the Father runs out to meet his returning son. And whilst they throw a party for this returned son, the Father leaves the party to plead with his older son who refuses to come inside.

So that's God's heart for us, but what does this look like in practice? Well, remember that verse from 2 Peter 3 about God not wanting anyone to perish? Let's have a look at the context of that statement.

A few verses earlier, Peter writes, 'Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation..."'

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise,

² From *Intentional* by Paul Williams.

as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.'

Peter says one reason that Jesus hasn't come back yet is because God is giving the world time to repent. Like Jesus in our story, he is giving us so many chances to overcome our indifference towards him.

If you are not a Christian, you might be indifferent to God, but God isn't indifferent to you. God wants you. Your indifference doesn't put him off and no disability will turn him away. If you think you are unworthy of God's interest, you're right. We are unworthy. But it's precisely our unworthiness that makes us worthy of his attention. He sees our rejection and disobedience and says, "I'm going to deal with that for you," and then Jesus gave up his life for us. All you have to do is believe and, because God wants you, you can know for certain that he will answer if you reach out. So please don't wait any longer. Repent and believe in the God who wants you.

And for the Christians in the room, it's our job to model the passion God has for saving sinners. Let's follow Jesus' example in this story. Let's not be put off by other people's indifference. Let's keep going; pursue that person; keep sharing the gospel with them. We only give up when they reject the gospel but even then, we don't give up completely. We keep praying and hope we get more opportunities. And we can take great confidence in the fact that God wants to save people. We will have success when we share the gospel because God wants to save people. God wants to save sinners.

Conclusion

So, sin matters, and hell is awful. We should be serious about both of those. But God wants us, so we know we have the answers to those problems. May the Lord encourage and motivate us with his great love for sinners. Amen.

Lord, thank you for this important story about our attitude towards you. Lord, we know we are guilty sinners deserving of hell, but we also know that you love to save sinners. Thank you for the death of Jesus that takes away our sin and saves us from hell. Lord, for all those here and all those we know and love who don't believe in you, please give them the faith to believe. Please give us a heart like yours to pursue them knowing that you want to save them. We can confidently reach out with the gospel because you will give us success. Amen.