



Why do we fear change? Most of us at some level recognize within ourselves the need for change. Yet we also recognize that the change we need can be hard to achieve.

An article from the magazine *Fast Company* began by asking: “Change or Die. What if you were given that choice? What if a well-informed, trusted authority figure said you had to make difficult and enduring changes in the way you think and act? If you didn’t, your time would end soon—a lot sooner than it had to. Could you change when change really mattered? When it mattered most?”

According to the article, the odds are 9-to-1 that you won’t change—even in the face of certain death. The author based that statistic on a study by Dr. Edward Miller at Johns Hopkins University. He studied patients whose heart disease was so severe they had to undergo bypass surgery or angioplasties. Many of these patients could alter the course of their disease by switching to healthier lifestyles. Yet very few do. Dr. Miller summarized his research on patients’ inability to change their lives: “If you look at people after coronary-artery bypass grafting two years later, 90% of them haven’t changed their lifestyle. And that’s been studied over and over and over again. And so we’re missing some link in there. Even though they know they have a very bad disease and they should change their lifestyle, for whatever reason, they can’t.”

Why is change so hard? What will it take for us to experience change? There’s a significant story about change in the fifth chapter of the gospel of John. We last left Jesus in Cana of Galilee where he encountered a royal official whose son was sick unto death, but Jesus healed the boy and taught the man an important lesson about mature faith. Now in chapter 5 John tells a story about another encounter. He sets the scene in verses 1–5.

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.

We’re Helpless in and of Ourselves to Change

Jesus travels from Cana of Galilee down to Jerusalem for another feast, which was required three times a year. John doesn’t tell

us which feast this was but focuses on what was happening inside one of the gates. The Sheep Gate was a small opening in the northern part of the wall that surrounded the city. Near that gate was the pool of Bethesda. In recent years, archeologists have excavated this very sight and you can visit Jerusalem today and see it for yourself. In Jesus’ day, and especially during the feasts, a mass of people with a variety of illnesses would gather on the porches besides the pool, hoping for a healing miracle.

If you have any Bible other than the KJV you may have noticed that verse 4 is missing and that’s because many of the oldest and best manuscripts leave it out. Many versions include the verse in a footnote which was probably added later, explaining why these people were there. They believed in a rather superstitious way that from time to time when the water was stirred that this was caused by an angel who visited the pool, and the first man who got into it afterwards would be healed. We see the same kind of thing in many parts of the world today. Lourdes, in southern France, has a spa which many believe has healing capacities. The shrine of Guadalupe, in Mexico City, has thousands of crutches stacked along its walls where it seems people have been healed.

We know now that the pool of Bethesda, like many similar pools in the Jerusalem area, is fed by a spring. At times water is released in surges from hidden reservoirs in the hills around the city, causing the waters to stir. This is what led to the superstition about an angel stirring the pool. And perhaps healing **had** occurred there. Even today healing can take place in these special areas where people go. Many of them can perhaps be explained psychologically, others not. At any rate, the pool at Bethesda had a reputation as a place where people could be healed.

Then John introduces us to a man who’d been coming there for 38 years. Some think this man had actually laid there for 38 years, but it doesn’t say that; it says he’d been an invalid for 38 years. We don’t know why. For some reason, he was weak and unable to stand. He may have been paralyzed, or perhaps he had a disease like tuberculosis or MS. In any event, he was unable to walk for 38 years.

Certainly in this man we see a picture of all of us. We all can see ourselves, in a sense, helpless, weak, crippled and lame, desperate for help, lying at the pool of Bethesda. We all find ourselves paralyzed at times, unable to change ourselves. Often, just as it was with this man, our weakness and need reaches back across many years and casts a shadow over the entire landscape

of our past. But this story helps us to understand how Jesus can bring real change to our lives.

The interesting thing is that Jesus chose to deal with just this one man. Remember, there was a great crowd of very sick people at the pool, all eagerly waiting for the water to be troubled. Why choose just him? He could have emptied the five porches, lined them all up and healed them one by one. But he went to this one particular man. Maybe it was because he was so helpless—38 years! Maybe that tugged at Jesus' heart, we don't know. One thing we do know is it wasn't because this man sought Jesus' help. In fact, the story will go on to show us he didn't even know who Jesus was. But through the power of Jesus he'll experience real change. What's fascinating about this story is the process through which this change takes place. We'll see Jesus speaking to this man three times. First, he'll ask a question. Second, he'll issue a command. And third, he'll offer a warning. Each one of these gives us insight into the process by which he brings real change into our lives.

We Must Decide if We Really Want to be Made Well

First, let's look at the question in verse 6.

When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

That's quite a question, wouldn't you say? This man had been disabled for almost 40 years, and Jesus has the nerve to ask, "*Do you want to be made well?*" Imagine going to a hospital and walking into the room of a very sick person and asking them, "Do you want to get well?" I've made a lot of hospital visits but never had the nerve to ask that. But that's what Jesus asked. Why? Jesus never asked a stupid question in his life. There was always a purpose. He's probing this man's heart. There's a real possibility that deep down this man didn't want to get well.

I think this is a question the Lord asks all of us. Do you really want to change? Do you really want to be made well? As I think about this man I can think of a few reasons he might not want to get well. The past 38 years he's been a beggar who lived off the pity of others. If he's healed, he'd lose all of this. In those days a person who was healed would lose a good living. It's true today as well. In some developing countries, parents will even cripple their children so they can earn a living begging. If he was healed this man would be venturing out into the unknown. He'd lose all his present securities. He'd have to be responsible for himself. He'd have to find work. There would be new possibilities, but also risk. He didn't have such a bad life. People felt sorry for him and some helped. He had a few friends there at the pool he liked to hang out with. Things weren't so bad.

I see this man in many people today. For many of us, the change we need is not always the change we want. There are people

whose lives are sick or dysfunctional, but they've never considered God might have something better for them. They've learned to live like this. They're satisfied with just subsisting. It's as though they're sick and are not aware of it, or if they are aware of it, it seems normal to them.

We see this even in the life of the church. There are people who come to church. They love the music. They feel accepted. They're excited about what they're hearing. But then something happens. Someone disappoints them or they hear something they don't like. Perhaps something is demanded of them, and they realize they don't really want to change and they leave.

Even as believers, we continue to be confronted by issues in our lives that need to be changed, like bitterness, unresolved conflicts and things that have lie hidden within us for years. The question is, "Do we really want to change?" I see this in my own life. There are areas in my life where I think I'd like to change and I know I should. There are patterns of living and ways of thinking I don't feel great about. On a certain level I do want to change, but on a deeper level I'm holding onto those things and I really don't want to let them go.

"Sir," the invalid replied, "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" (v. 7).

In this man's response, you see his mindset. On the one hand, he seems to be saying, "Of course I want to be made well, but no one is there to help me!" On the other hand, he didn't really answer Jesus' question. He kind of dismisses the question and just complains about his condition. He tells how unfortunate he is. He points the finger at others. "I have no one to help me. Everyone else beats me to the punch." For sure, it wasn't fair. I get this. The other day I was in line at the drive-through pharmacy. There were two lines and I got into the one on the right because there were fewer cars in front of me, while the car behind me got into the line at the left. But we ended up at our respective windows at the same time. I wasn't happy about that, but I really wasn't happy when she got helped first! Well, this guy wasn't happy either, and so instead of answering Jesus' question he whines about the how unfair the system is. In today's language, he has a victim mentality. There are people who always see themselves as a victim, a victim of society, a victim of their upbringing, or even a victim of an unfair God. The cry of the perpetual victim is, "It's not my fault!"

But at some point we have to decide if we really want to stop complaining and be made well.

We Must Decide if We're Willing to Believe and Act

We also have to decide if we're willing to believe and act. The next thing Jesus does is issue a command. Look what he says.

Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked (verses 8–9a).

Notice what Jesus **didn't** say. He didn't say, “Okay, next time the water stirs I'll help you into the pool.” He didn't say, “Hang on. Keep showing up and one day you'll get in that pool in time.” He didn't say, “Let's at least make you comfortable. Let's get you a softer mat to lie on, put a few flowers around you and arrange to bring you two meals a day.” He didn't try to organize all the sick people with a numbering system so that people like him who had no one to help him could have a chance at the pool when the waters stirred. These are the things **we** say or do. But Jesus doesn't say or do any of those things.

Instead he commands him to get up, pick up his mat and walk. On what basis can Jesus say that to him? Certainly it wasn't the man's own power but the power of Jesus. The word Jesus uses here for “Get up” shows up often in this gospel. It means to rise. It usually describes the resurrection power of Jesus over sin and death. Later in this chapter Jesus says, *“Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live”* (v. 25). That word “live” is the same word as “Get up.” So this man must have thought, “If this man tells me to get up, it must mean he'll do something to make it possible.” So his faith is transferred from his own ability to Jesus's ability.

But he also had to act. He had to do what Jesus told him to do. That's critical when we talk about change. There's always something God tells us to do as an expression of our faith. This is a word of action. Jesus doesn't say, “Try to conjure enough faith in your head and then get up.” He just says, “Get up!” Obviously it was Jesus who would give him the power to do what he told him to do, and the moment the man's will agreed with the Lord's will the power was there. Notice how Jesus didn't tell him to do just one thing but three things. Once he got up, he wanted him to lift his mat and then walk. All by himself. No one carrying his mat for him, no one carrying him. I think this shows the thoroughness of his healing and the extent of God's power. And that's what he did. He was strong enough to not just get up and to carry his own mat but to walk.

When it comes to change, there's always this curious combination of dependance on God's power and our own willingness to act in faith. Some people depend on God's power but never act; others try to act but fail to depend on God's power. Lately I've taken up lap swimming. When I started out I was thrashing through the water and practically dead after a few minutes. But then I watched a video on how to swim for distance and learned how to lengthen my stroke and relax as I swim. The results were incredible. I still exert myself, but I can swim a mile without it killing me. That's how real change takes place. We have to act;

we have to jump in the pool and exert ourselves, but as we do we rest in the power of God, knowing that only he can change us.

How do we change? First, we have to decide if we really want to be made well. Second, we have to decide if we're willing to act in faith. You'd think that would be enough, but it's not.

We Must Decide if We're Willing to Stop Sinning

Look what happens next.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.”

But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’ ”

So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?”

The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well (verses 9b–15).

John explains all of this took place on the Sabbath. The Jewish leaders had all kinds of rules about what you could and couldn't do on the Sabbath. Of course God is the one who instituted the Sabbath and he gave instructions on what that meant. But the Jewish leaders added all kinds of nit-picky rules and one of them is seen right here. You can't carry your mat because that looked like a form of work. So they see this guy walking with his rolled up mat over his shoulder, and instead of being happy for the guy that he's been healed, they want to throw him in jail. I love what he says, “The guy who made me well told me to do it.” They want to know who that was and notice he doesn't even know who it was. It seems he even looked for Jesus to point him out to them but he was long gone. You can begin to see what a disagreeable character he was. He's willing to throw Jesus under the bus, not once but twice. After he meets Jesus again in the Temple, he runs off and tells the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who made him well! There's really very little to admire in this man.

That comes out clearly in the third thing we see Jesus saying in the passage to this man. He says to the man, *“See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”* When Jesus says to stop sinning he implies he **had** been sinning and that had been the cause of his illness. Let me be clear here. The Bible tells us not all sickness is directly a result of our own sin. In John 9 Jesus will clearly say in the case of a man born blind that it wasn't caused by his sin. The book of Job makes the same point. Job's suffering wasn't a result of his sin as his so-called

friends proclaimed throughout the book. But there are some situations in which sickness is the result of sin. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul rebukes the same people in the church who were abusing the Lord's Supper and he says, *"That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep"* (1 Cor. 11:30).

This does **not** mean that everyone who sins will get sick, or that everyone's sickness can be traced back to their sin. But this was the case with this man. We don't know what the sin was but it seems it was something that had taken control of his life. Just because he was healed didn't mean it would stop. So Jesus tells him to stop it; cut it out of your life. And if you don't, something worse, like God's judgment, may happen to you.

Now all of that sounds kind of ruthless. Whatever happened to the meek and mild Jesus who demands nothing and is endlessly patient with us? And who can really stop sinning? But Jesus loves this man. It's a tough love, but it's true. There are a couple of things to keep in mind. First, notice in verse 14 that Jesus was the one who found this man in the temple later that day. Why did he do that? He wanted to be more than this man's healer; he wanted to be his Savior. It's a reminder that he takes the initiative with us because he wants to be in relationship with us and he wants us to grow and change. So when Jesus tells us to stop sinning this comes out of love and care and a desire to be in relationship with us.

The other thing that strikes me is before he says, *"Stop sinning"* he says, *"See, you have been made well."* Why does he say that? It seems there was a connection between this man's physical healing ("you have been made well") and spiritual healing ("stop sinning"). The fact that he was physically healed made it all the more important that he took the next step. It might have even made it possible for him to take the next step. That's how it works for us. We can't really change unless God begins a work in our lives, as he did with this man. But, once he does that, then we have to take the next step for there to be lasting change.

I think of people here who have somehow been touched by the Lord as this man was. Maybe you've experienced a powerful answer to prayer. Maybe the Lord has healed you of some infirmity.

His work in your life shouldn't stop there. He wants to find you like he found this man, he wants you to know who he is, and he wants to help you to change habits and patterns of living that need to be dealt with. And he'll give you the power to do that. Not only does he have the power to heal, he has the power to change the way you live your life.

I'm sure most of you know Barry Zito is a pitcher for the SF Giants. In August of 2011 Barry Zito became a follower of Christ. That may or may not be why his pitching has changed for the better, but what's more important is how his life has changed. He said in a recent interview: "Sometimes you have to go through difficulty and physical trials to really get broken down. In 2011, I got broken down physically as well as mentally... I had this very odd injury in April of 2011... I came off the field that day after never being hurt in 11 years, and I said, 'All right, something bigger is going on here. A message is being sent, and I've got to listen.' A few months later, I realized I'd been doing it alone. My best friend told me an old story I really love. A shepherd will be leading his sheep, and one of the sheep will be walking astray from the pack. The shepherd will take his rod and break the sheep's leg, and the sheep will have to rely on the shepherd to get better. But once that leg is healed, that sheep never leaves the side of the shepherd again. That's a really beautiful metaphor. A lot of things happen to us as people, and we realize we've been relying on our own strength for too long. Last September, I got a tattoo, and it's the only one I have, of a golden calf on the inside of my right bicep. I show people that, and it signifies idolatry and that I was putting things before God. I haven't talked much about this. When I committed with my chaplain, he said, 'You don't need to go around telling people this stuff. There will come a time and a place.' I guess that's a change for me too. I used to kind of dig attention. Now I'm seeking deeper fulfillment."

Jesus Christ has the power to change our lives. But we must decide if we want to be made well. We must decide if we're willing to believe and act. We must be willing to stop sinning.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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