

Pick Up Your Mat

Jesus is Lord over all creation and values all people.

JOHN 5:5-16

MEMORY VERSE: JOHN 5:21

STUDY John 5:5-16, paying attention to the actions of the people involved and considering what this reveals about their view of Jesus and of other people. Use Explore the Text on pages 75-79 to gain insight into the differences between legalism and obedience. Reflect on how God calls us to obedience rooted in love.

CREATE a teaching plan for your group using the ideas on pages 80-82. Focus on helping the group recognize God's compassion as manifested in the person of Jesus and their own role as agents of compassion to the world. Consider using a teaching approach you have yet to use this quarter. (See p. 82 for ideas.)

GATHER the following items:

- Extra *Personal Study Guides* (PSGs)
- Any materials needed for the options on page 82

Prepare to display:

Pack Item 3

(Poster: Seven Signs in John's Gospel)

Make copies of:

Pack Item 10

(Handout: Seven Signs in John's Gospel)

CONSULT the weekly Explore the Bible adult podcast to gain insights on the go about this week's study on Ministry Grid, Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or at goExploreTheBible.com/adults-training.

REINFORCE the session by selecting a few volunteers to plan a service project for your group. Encourage them to focus on serving a group that is often marginalized or overlooked in your community. Instruct them to consider how this time of service will help others recognize the love of Christ.

FIRST THOUGHTS

KEY DOCTRINE

The Christian and Social Order

We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. (See Deuteronomy 10:18; James 1:27.)

Pity usually involves our response to a situation. We define a person by what he or she is experiencing. Compassion usually involves our response to a person. We define the experience by how the person is impacted. Compassion tends to move us toward acting because our focus is on the person and not the situation. We see Jesus showing both pity and compassion as he interacted with an unnamed lame man.

(In PSG, p. 64) **What is the difference between pity and compassion? Can a person express both simultaneously? Explain.**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

BIBLE SKILL

Use a Bible dictionary to gain deeper insight.

Read an article about the Sabbath in a Bible dictionary. Note Bible passages cited in the article, reading selected passages. How do the Old Testament and New Testament teachings on the Sabbath complement each other? How did Jesus's actions in John 5 demonstrate respect for the Sabbath and the rightness of acting on that day?

JOHN 5:1-47

Why does God choose to heal some people and not others? Only in His divine providence can we rest in the knowledge that His love for everyone does not eliminate anyone from His care. In John 5, the apostle highlighted Christ's compassion and His unconditional love.

On His way into Jerusalem for an unspecified festival, Jesus found a large number of people gathered as usual around the Pool of Bethesda. Located just inside the northeastern wall of the city, the pool offered respite for Jesus and other travelers coming through the Sheep Gate. Possibly the gate's name came from its being the place where sheep were brought for sacrifice or for the marketplace. Bethesda was one of several large water reservoirs for Jerusalem. The pool rested on two levels with porches, or colonnades, surrounding the four sides. Another wall divided the upper and lower levels.

In addition to pilgrims who stopped to wash and rest, many sick and injured people gathered on the porches. They believed that an angel occasionally stirred the water and the first person into the pool would be healed. Among those needing help, Jesus focused on one lame man. After healing the man, Jesus told him to take his mat and go home. When inquiring Jews—probably religious leaders—began to question him about Sabbath violations, the man pointed them toward Jesus, though he didn't know His identity at the time. This set up the first of many confrontations between Jesus and the leaders recorded in John's Gospel.

Jesus used the conflict as an opportunity to declare Himself to be the Messiah, God's Son. In an extended discourse Jesus described His relationship with the Father. The Jewish leaders denounced His "work" on the Sabbath, but Jesus worked just as the Father worked. He was intimately

aware of the Father's desires and did only what He saw the Father doing. As the Father had power to bestow life, the Son offered eternal life to all who believed in Him. Jesus prophesied of the coming day when people would hear and respond to the Son's voice and live.

As Jesus continued to demonstrate His divine nature and power, He declared ways the Father had validated the Son. Evidence of His authority came from the Father. His works (such as this healing), His judgment, and His power derived not from human sources but from His deity.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

COMPASSION EXPRESSED (JOHN 5:5-9a)

Verse 5

If someone with a short-term illness finds healing, the recovery could be attributed to natural processes or medical treatment. When Jesus healed people with long-term problems, though, He never hesitated to identify the Source. In Scripture, He healed a man who was blind since birth (John 9:1-34) and a woman who suffered a blood disease for twelve years. He also healed the man in this story, who had been **disabled for thirty-eight years**. Perhaps Jesus chose him because he had been lame for so long. Since doctors could obviously do nothing for him, God the Son chose to intervene.

John did not describe how the man got to *Bethesda*. Likely, some friends or family members carried him back and forth to the pool. The fact that he remained without anyone to help him suggests that they did not believe in the curative miracles attributed to the pool.

Verses 6-7

The phrase **when Jesus saw him lying there** could mean Jesus met the man accidentally. However, Jesus never did anything by happenstance. We must envision the scene John painted in the earlier verses. This pool was the destination for many infirm people who came in desperation. Among the mass of sick and injured souls, Jesus saw this single man. Nothing about him commanded Jesus's favor. Solely based on His purpose and compassion, Jesus approached this individual.

Realized suggests possessing knowledge. Jesus did not suddenly surmise that the man had been at the pool **a long time**. In His divine omniscience, He knew exactly how long the man had been disabled and how many times he had come to Bethesda hoping for help. Jesus understood the condition of his body and his heart. His words addressed both.

Remarkably, Jesus asked a question that seems unnecessary: **"Do you want to get well?"** The Lord knew the answer before He asked it, but He wanted the man to confront his need. Would he be willing to act on faith to receive healing? Unfortunately, many people fail to seek God's help with their problems. Because of their unbelief and inaction, they miss opportunities to experience the Lord's mercy.

VERSE 5

⁵ One man was there who had been disabled for thirty-eight years.

VERSES 6-7

⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and realized he had already been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to get well?" ⁷ "Sir," the disabled man answered, "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I'm coming, someone goes down ahead of me."

John did not name the object of Jesus’s question. He simply identified him as **the disabled man**. After so many years, that is likely how the man viewed himself. Others, too, probably did not consider other aspects of the his life. His disability defined him.

The man could have responded indignantly to Jesus’s question. However, helplessness often begets humility. He addressed Jesus with a term that could be rendered *lord* or *master*, but in this context, it is best translated as **Sir**, an acknowledgment of respect. As evidenced by the man’s later reply to the Jewish religious leaders, he did not know who Jesus was. He would not know about Jesus’s previous miracles.

The man blamed his lack of wellness on the absence of anyone to help him. His condition prevented his getting into the **pool when the water was stirred up**. This superstition concerning the healing powers of the pool and the presence of an angel was not affirmed by Jesus. Some scholars believe the water moved because of a spring which fed the pool.

The man’s statement **while I’m coming** indicates that he had tried to act. His infirmity hindered his movement, and **someone** always went **down ahead** of him. Others brought him to the pool each day, but no one stayed to help him. Perhaps the man was left at Bethesda for days at a time, begging for food and depending on others to survive. In any case, he had no one except Jesus to care for him.

Verses 8-9a

Jesus did not debate the man’s condition or join him in bemoaning his lack of aid. Instead, He commanded the man: **“Get up.”** Jesus often demanded personal action as evidence of belief. He rarely healed anyone without requiring some step of faith (see Matt. 13:58). The man had to act solely on Christ’s word.

In the same sentence, Jesus added to the instructions. Having risen, the man was to **pick up your mat and walk**. Someone who had been lame for so long would have experienced severe atrophy of the leg muscles. Yet, Jesus expected him not only to stand up on his own, but also to lift the mat on which he had been lying and carry it. Anyone standing nearby and watching this interaction would have been astonished.

The man’s response and healing were immediate. **Instantly**, he **got well**. Jesus does not command us without giving us the ability to carry out His instructions. The man perceived strength entering his broken body. Limbs that had lain lifeless began to move.

Recognizing what had happened, the man obeyed the second part of Jesus’s directions. He **picked up his mat and started to walk**. The tense of this verb describes an ongoing act of walking. His obedience in picking up his bed was as much an act of faith as standing up. Imagine the amazement of people nearby who had watched him lie in this place for many years! The context is silent about who might have heard Jesus speak to the man, but others undeniably witnessed the result.

Believers should offer compassion to all people. Like the man in this story, many needy people have no one to help them. God puts us in their paths so we can be His channel of blessing.

VERSES 8-9a

⁸ “Get up,” Jesus told him, “pick up your mat and walk.” ^{9a} Instantly the man got well, picked up his mat, and started to walk.

(In PSG, p. 67) **How does a person's obedience to Jesus serve as a statement of faith as well?**

LEGALISM EXPOSED (JOHN 5:9b-13)

Verses 9b-11

The term translated **now** connects two important elements of the story: the healing and the day it occurred. John made it clear that Jesus was fully aware that He had healed on **the Sabbath**. He also knew that the religious leaders would object to anything that resembled their traditional view of work. However, Jesus never allowed legalism to hinder His compassion.

Understanding Jewish rituals around the Sabbath is key to understanding the significance of both Jesus's actions and His commands. Through the years, scribes and other teachers had added to the biblical law with an unbiblical result. Through that lens, Jesus violated the Sabbath by healing the man because that was considered work. Likewise, the man was breaking the rules because he was not allowed to carry anything on the Sabbath. So, as the man walked home with his mat, he was confronted by **the Jews**. John used this phrase to designate the religious leaders who upheld the Sabbath laws and opposed Jesus.

The average person would not have been so sensitive about the man's activity. Sadly, the religious leaders were more concerned with an apparent breach of **the Sabbath** than the fact that the man **had been healed**. As mentioned, they had been taught that the **law** prohibited "labor," like **picking up** his **mat**. Actually, the law did not specify such minor matters. While it did exclude most forms of work, it focused more on the holiness of the day than on the minor tasks of living (Ex. 20:8-11).

Over time, though, religious leaders had expanded the definitions of what the law prohibited. In fact, by the first century, Jewish rabbis had identified thirty-nine types of "work" forbidden on the Sabbath. One of these prohibitions was carrying a load from one place to another. They thought they could protect the law by building a wall around it, but they ended up replacing God's intentions with their own traditions.

In this scenario, the accusers' attitudes betrayed their hypocrisy. They viewed the man's act as violating the Sabbath, but they did not see the more profound issues of their own pride, hostility, and lack of compassion. They were guilty of profaning the spirit of the Sabbath.

Probably frightened, the man tried to defend himself by deflecting responsibility to Jesus. He did not know Jesus's name, so he simply referred to Him as **the man who made me well**. Rather than giving God glory, the man focused on the Jews' accusations. He acknowledged he had been healed by this unknown benefactor, whom he also blamed for telling him to carry his mat. He should have been grateful after suffering for nearly four decades. Instead, his fear caused him to shift responsibility.

VERSES 9b-11

^{9b} Now that day was the Sabbath, ¹⁰ and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "This is the Sabbath. The law prohibits you from picking up your mat."

¹¹ He replied, "The man who made me well told me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'"

VERSE 12

¹² “Who is this man who told you, ‘Pick up your mat and walk?’” they asked.

Verse 12

Naturally, the Jews wanted to know **who is this man**. Their tone implied more than a request for information. They believed no religiously responsible Jew would tell someone to violate the Sabbath. These accusers were not concerned that the man was made whole, and they were not impressed that someone else had healed him. The Jews focused their indignation on whoever told the man to **pick up** his **mat** and **walk**. Failing to show compassion, they used religious practices as a weapon.

This action set the stage for a confrontation between Jesus and the leaders. The Sabbath was set aside as a day to glorify God by following His example of resting. To give this man physical rest through healing exemplified God’s intention for the day. The Jews were so obsessed with their definitions of Sabbath laws that they forgot the purpose behind the law. Legalism negates the spirit of God’s law by magnifying ritual and human tradition to the exclusion of love and compassion.

(In PSG, p. 68) **How can religion become an excuse not to show compassion to hurting people?**

VERSE 13

¹³ But the man who was healed did not know who it was, because Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

Verse 13

After healing the man, **Jesus had slipped away into the crowd**. He knew the conflict was coming and wanted to speak to the man privately later on. He was not afraid of confrontation, but He would deal with the hypocrisy of these Jews in His own timing.

Consequently, the man **did not know who it was**. He never asked Jesus’s name either before or after his healing. Amazement at his new condition diverted his attention from the Healer to the healing.

Believers can affirm Jesus’s work in the lives of others. Sometimes God chooses to heal supernaturally. Other times, He uses doctors, medicine, and other human methods. Still, behind all healing, whether medical or miracle, stands the Great Physician. In His divine providence, God determines who and how to heal. We are called to recognize His work.

VERSE 14

¹⁴ After this, Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you are well. Do not sin anymore, so that something worse doesn’t happen to you.”

IDENTITY EXPOSED (JOHN 5:14-16)

Verse 14

Later on, Jesus deliberately sought the man out and **found him in the temple**. Perhaps the man simply came to pray, or he may have come to present an offering for his healing (Lev. 22:29). After all, for the first time in thirty-eight years, he could actually enter the house of God and worship there. However, the man still failed to look for the One who had healed him. Jesus, however, came looking for him.

Interestingly, Jesus cautioned the man, even though he was now **well**. Having been blessed with restoration of his limbs, the man should have

been grateful. Instead, Jesus warned him that he should not **sin anymore**. The word *anymore* does not mean that his disability was the result of sin, but that he had maintained a sinful attitude in the past. While not all sin carries physical consequences, Jesus told him **something worse** than disability could happen if he continued to sin.

Too often, people experience God's grace, only to forget their changed circumstances and return to their old lifestyle. We should remember how God demonstrates His grace in our lives and reflect gratitude for His work going forward.

Verses 15-16

The man did not use this opportunity to thank Jesus or seek further spiritual counsel. Instead, he **reported to the Jews**. Earlier, he found himself confronted by the Jewish leaders because he apparently broke their Sabbath traditions. He could have simply avoided them, but he deliberately went to tell them **it was Jesus who had made him well**. The man must have known they would be angry with Jesus. Nevertheless, he betrayed the One to whom he owed everything to gain the favor of those he owed nothing.

The Jews began persecuting Jesus as a result of His actions **on the Sabbath**. Following His discussion with them, He explained His right to heal on the Sabbath came from His relationship with the Father. His words demonstrated that everything He did and said came directly from the Father, who repeatedly approved of the Son. Because He not only had profaned (in their opinion) the Sabbath, but also claimed equality with God, these leaders became enraged and sought Jesus's life.

Believers can celebrate the works of Jesus. Instead of being timid when it comes to testifying about Christ, we should proclaim His glory to everyone. People need to know why we follow Jesus. They also need His saving work in their lives. By glorifying Him, we can be His witnesses.

(In PSG, p. 71) **Why is it sometimes easier to find fault instead of celebrating Jesus's working in a person's life?**

VERSES 15-16

¹⁵ The man went and reported to the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

¹⁶ Therefore, the Jews began persecuting Jesus because he was doing these things on the Sabbath.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION

BEGIN: As the group arrives, invite them to discuss these questions: *What is the difference between pity and compassion? Can a person express both simultaneously?*
Explain. (PSG, p. 64) Call on volunteers to suggest scenarios where one might feel compassion or pity or both.

COMPARE: Direct attention to the introduction on page 64 of the *Personal Study Guide* (PSG). Lead the group to consider whether they agree or disagree with these descriptions of pity and compassion in that paragraph.

TRANSITION: *In today's session, we will see how Jesus showed both pity and compassion as he interacted with a disabled man. Think about how Jesus shows compassion to you and how He calls you to show compassion to others.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

INTRODUCE: Set the scene for Jesus and the disabled man by using information from the Leader Guide (pp. 74-75) and the PSG (p. 65). Explain the location and significance of Bethesda. Note the healing powers many associated with the pool.

HIGHLIGHT: Point to **Pack Item 3** (*Poster: Seven Signs in John's Gospel*). Point out that this passage describes the third sign Jesus performed in John's Gospel. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: Seven Signs in John's Gospel*). Draw attention to the third sign. Note that it not only reveals His compassion but it also reveals, again, that He is God's Son, the Messiah.

READ: **Read aloud John 5:5-9a** (ending with "and started to walk"). Call for the group to pay attention to Jesus's question and to how the disabled man responded.

ASK: *How would you characterize Jesus's attitude toward the disabled man? How would you describe the man's attitude toward Jesus?*

CONNECT: Direct the group to the summary statement on page 64 of the PSG: *Jesus is Lord over all creation and values all people*. Invite the group to suggest connections between the summary statement and Jesus's encounter with the man at Bethesda. Connect Jesus's ability to heal with His role as Lord over all creation. Emphasize the value Jesus sees in all people, not just the rich or influential. Point out that He chose to go to the helpless and needy.

EVALUATE: Direct the group to read silently the paragraphs and question under verses 8-9a. (PSG, p. 67). Encourage the group to discuss whether the man's actions were a statement of faith. Emphasize how obedience to Jesus can show faith while disobedience points to a lack of faith.

TRANSITION: *The man's faith in Jesus allowed him to do something he had never done. Jesus healed the man because he was willing to literally take a step of faith. But in the middle of the most important moment of his life, the man faced some stiff opposition from a group that was more concerned with holding to their own power than in celebrating the power that had changed this man's life.*

READ: **Call on a volunteer to read John 5:9b-13.** Direct the group to pay attention to what caught the Jewish leaders' attention in these verses.

INTRODUCE: Read aloud the first paragraph in the PSG under verses 9b-10 (p. 68). Ask: *What made the Sabbath such a sticking point to these Jews? Why did John mention the man's mat?*

STUDY: Divide the group into two teams. Instruct each team to complete the first half of the Bible Skill (PSG, p. 69). Assign one team the Old Testament, while the other team focuses on the New Testament. Let them know they will answer the two questions as a group. After a few minutes, call the group back together to share what they learned. Discuss the final two questions in the Bible Skill: **How do the Old Testament and New Testament teachings on Sabbath complement each other? How did Jesus's actions in John 5 demonstrate respect for the Sabbath and the rightness of acting on that day?**

ASSERT: *The Jewish authorities drew their power and authority from the law. So, they wanted to make sure everyone kept the law as they defined it—no exceptions. In this case, they were so focused on their rules that they failed to recognize the miracle in front of them and failed to show compassion.*

ASK: **How can religion become an excuse not to show compassion to hurting people?** (PSG, p. 68) **How might legalism hold us back from celebrating the work of Jesus in someone's life?**

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **John 5:14-16**, as the group pays attention to the man's response to Jesus.

CLARIFY: Use information from the PSG (pp. 70-71) to explain that while Jesus called on the man to stop sinning, He did not connect all suffering to sin as many did in that culture. Note that by warning the man not to sin anymore, Jesus was primarily referring to eternal judgment.

ASSERT: *Jesus originally showed compassion for the man's physical condition by healing him. Now, He was addressing the man's spiritual situation by warning him to stop living in sin. In every situation we experience, Jesus meets us right where we are and touches our lives right where we need Him most.*

ASK: **How would you describe the man's actions in these verses?** Note that the man may have been trying to ingratiate himself to the Jewish authorities by identifying Jesus. Point out that this time he did not refer to Jesus as the One who told him to break the Sabbath, but as his Healer.

HIGHLIGHT: Draw attention back to **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: The Seven Signs of John*) and **Pack Item 3** (*Poster: The Seven Signs in John*). Point out that this healing marks a shift in how John reported Jesus's signs. Explain that with this sign, His miracles become points of contention with leaders and their motivation for persecuting Him.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

REVIEW: Invite the group to locate and read the Key Doctrine (PSG, p. 71). Encourage them to consider how God's compassion for His people leads us to show compassion for others. Lead the group to propose ways the application statements under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 72) connect the Key Doctrine to today's session.

RESPOND: Lead a discussion of the second question set under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 72): **In your regular errands and outings, where are you likely to encounter people who are hurting or who have been marginalized? Recognizing those potential encounters, what can you do to prepare to minister to them and show them compassion?** Encourage the group to discuss ways to meet spiritual and physical needs. Remind them of the power of prayer in these encounters.

PRAY: Close with prayer, praising God for His compassion and asking Him to guide your group into opportunities to show compassion to others this week.

OPTIONS

Use these options to supplement and enhance the group plans on the previous pages.

MUSIC

Play “Mighty to Save,” as performed by Michael W. Smith. Call on the group to consider how Jesus’s crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension affect the way believers understand His acts of compassion during His earthly ministry.

VISUAL

Gather poster board or a whiteboard, along with some markers.

Guide the group in creating a chart that shows how Jesus’s example can help us show compassion. In one column, lead the group to list obstacles that can hold us back from showing compassion to others. In another column, invite them to identify ways Jesus refused to allow obstacles to hold Him back. Invite the group to draw from other biblical examples of compassion, including from their study of John’s Gospel. Some possible ideas to discuss include the number of people at the pool and the fact that the disabled man may have appeared uninterested in Jesus or unwilling to help himself.

CREATIVE WRITING

Gather paper and pens.

Place the group into teams of two to four. Direct each team to write a short, contemporary account of compassion being shown to someone in need that parallels Jesus’s encounter with the disabled man. Explain that this could involve a Christian showing the compassion of Christ or recasting Jesus’s miracle in a modern setting. Instruct the teams to share their stories and discuss how this can guide them in showing compassion.

TESTIMONY

Pre-enlist one or two volunteers to share about times when they experienced the compassion of Christ from another believer. Encourage them to include information about how they have experienced compassion directly from Christ and invite them to consider parallels between the two experiences.

CASE STUDY

Prepare two case studies about people who have suffered chronically and are wondering if the suffering is their own fault. In one case study, include details that point to sinful behaviors that have led to some of the person’s suffering. In the other, describe a person who suffers through no fault of their own. Include questions and doubts for both people to express. Lead the group in considering how they could demonstrate the compassion of Jesus to each person.

VERBAL

Invite a volunteer to read Exodus 34:6. Remind the group that this is part of God’s self-revelation to Moses. Call for volunteers to share ways they see these attributes of God exhibited by Jesus in His encounter with the disabled man.