



# *Pick Up Your Mat*

Jesus is Lord over all creation and values all people.

## JOHN 5:5-16

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.

**What is the difference between pity and compassion? Can a person express both simultaneously? Explain.**

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# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## JOHN 5:1-47

Jerusalem's only natural source of water is the Gihon Spring, which flows east of the City of David. Water from the spring collects in underground caves. Beyond these, people once dug massive cisterns into the bedrock to collect rainwater. They lined these cisterns with a gray mortar that contained ash, soot, and other organic matter. After returning from Babylonian captivity, the people began to build large open-air pools that served as water reservoirs for the city's growing population. One of these was the Pool of Bethesda, which was located north of the temple mount.

On His way into Jerusalem for an unspecified festival, Jesus found a large number of people gathered around the Pool of Bethesda. Located just inside the northeastern wall of the city, the pool offered respite for travelers coming through the Sheep Gate. The gate's name possibly resulted from its being the place where sheep were brought for sacrifice or for the marketplace.

In addition to travelers from the northern territories who stopped to wash and rest, many chronically ill and injured people gathered around the pool. Jews and non-Jews alike believed the waters had healing powers. Non-Jews saw it as a healing sanctuary and attributed its powers to Eshmun, the Semitic god of healing. They believed that an angel stirred the water on occasion and the first person to enter the pool would be healed.

After healing a man who had been lame for thirty-eight years, Jesus told him to take his mat and go home. Instead of showing gratitude to Jesus for his healing, the man deliberately sought the inquiring Jews to report Jesus's identity, setting up a confrontation between the Jewish leaders and Jesus. Jesus used the conflict as an opportunity to declare Himself to be God's Son.

**As you read John 5:5-16, chart the actions of each person or group of people involved. What do the actions and reactions of each person or group reveal about their view of Jesus and of people?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## COMPASSION EXPRESSED (JOHN 5:5-9a)

<sup>5</sup> One man was there who had been disabled for thirty-eight years.  
<sup>6</sup> 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?” <sup>7</sup> “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.” <sup>8</sup> “Get up,” Jesus told him, “pick up your mat and walk.” <sup>9a</sup> Instantly the man got well, picked up his mat, and started to walk.

### VERSES 5-7

Jesus gave His attention to those who were hurting and helpless—those disenfranchised and discarded by proper society. He focused on those whom others ignored. That was the case when He passed by the Pool of Bethesda. Proper rabbis and religious leaders would have avoided such a place out of concern that contact with the sick and suffering might make them ritualistically impure. Such contact would make them unfit for temple service.

At the pool, Jesus saw a man who ***had been disabled for thirty-eight years***. Reading this detail, John’s Jewish audience likely recalled that the Israelites wandered thirty-eight years as they traveled from Kadesh-barnea to the Zared Valley (Deut. 2:14). Whether in the wilderness or beside a pool of water, the almost four decades had to seem like an eternity, especially when one is longing for relief.

John did not describe the man’s disability. Evidently, though, it caused some type of paralysis or weakness that rendered the man unable to maneuver himself. When Jesus saw him, He knew that the disabled man had ***already been*** by the pool ***a long time***.

Whereas Jesus performed the earlier two signs in John’s Gospel at the request of someone else (John 2:3; 4:47), Jesus Himself initiated the healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda. He began the conversation with the man by asking if he wanted to be healed. This question is a reminder that some people become comfortable in their misery. Others who suffer can be overcome with a sense of hopelessness; this was likely the case for the disabled man.

The man's response indicated he did not know who Jesus was. Rather than focus on Jesus's ability, the man fixated on his own disability. He explained why he had not been able to make it into the waters and be healed. He had **no one** to put him into the waters when they stirred. Standing before him, though, was the One who could both help and heal him. Yet the man did not know who Jesus was (see v. 13).

### ***Rather than focus on Jesus's ability, the man fixated on his own disability.***

Believers should not ignore persons in need simply because they have suffered for a long time. Too often, we dismiss such sufferers with the idea that they could improve themselves if only they would. Like the man in this story, many people—including the unborn—have no one to help them. God puts us in their paths by divine appointment so we can be His channel of blessing.

**How was interacting with the nameless man an act of mercy? Why does Jesus expect His followers to be instruments of His mercy?**

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#### **VERSES 8-9a**

The power of Jesus to heal and to change a life is not limited by external or physical circumstances. He spoke simply with three commands: ***Get up, . . . pick up your mat and walk.***

This time the man offered no excuses. He did not further bemoan his physical condition. Instead, he responded with obedience, following Jesus's commands. He was able to obey ***instantly*** because Jesus had made the man well. Taking his mat with him underscored the permanence of the man's healing; he would not be returning to the Pool of Bethesda tomorrow.

**How does a person's obedience to Jesus serve as a statement of faith as well?**

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## DID YOU KNOW?

*The Mishnah*, a collection of Jewish rabbinic discussions compiled about AD 220, has six major divisions. Two of the divisions (Shabbath and Erubin) are devoted to rules and regulations regarding the Sabbath and define “work” under thirty-nine headings in an attempt to show what was allowed or prohibited on the Sabbath. (See article on p. 127.)

## LEGALISM EXPOSED (JOHN 5:9b-13)

**<sup>9b</sup> Now that day was the Sabbath,<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> He replied, “The man who made me well told me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’”<sup>12</sup> “Who is this man who told you, ‘Pick up your mat and walk’?” they asked.<sup>13</sup> But the man who was healed did not know who it was, because Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.**

### VERSES 9b-10

John’s next sentence sounds an ominous note—the healing occurred on ***the Sabbath***. In picking up and carrying his mat, the man at the Pool of Bethesda had committed a violation that was listed in *The Mishnah’s* “carrying goods” category. Jews likely based this in part on Jeremiah 17:21-22, which prohibits carrying a load through the city gates or out of one’s house on the Sabbath.

Rather than show compassion, the Jewish authorities focused only on how the man violated their religious beliefs and practices. Their behavior is a reminder that we can easily get our eyes off people and miss opportunities to show care and concern to the wounded and hurting who are right in front of us.

**How can religion become an excuse not to show compassion to hurting people?**

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## VERSES 11-13

Upon hearing the Jews' criticism, the man explained that the reason he was carrying his mat was because the one who healed him had said, **Pick up your mat and walk**. Wanting to make sure he did not come into the crosshairs of the religious authorities, the man blamed Jesus for his healing.

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### **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?

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The Jews demanded to know, **Who is this man . . .?** The question itself sounds like an accusation. Their concern was not about this seemingly random man who had violated the Sabbath. They wanted to know about the man who had the audacity to instigate this disobedience. They saw Him as the greater threat.

Still trying to claim his innocence, the healed man reported, albeit truthfully, that he **did not know** who Jesus was. Jesus had **slipped away** and disappeared **into the crowd**. Incredibly, the unnamed man had shown no interest in asking Jesus's name either before or after his healing. He was so concerned with the miracle that he forgot about the miracle worker.

Sometimes God chooses to heal supernaturally, without human intervention. At other times, God uses doctors, medicine, and other physical implements. Behind all healing is the Great Physician. In His divine providence, God determines who and how to heal, but in every instance, we recognize the Lord at work.

## Why might Jesus act in a person's life even when they do not recognize Him?

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### IDENTITY EXPOSED (JOHN 5:14-16)

<sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> The man went and reported to the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. <sup>16</sup> Therefore, the Jews began persecuting Jesus because he was doing these things on the Sabbath.

#### VERSES 14-16

The next time we read of the man and Jesus, they were both *in the temple*. The verb tense Jesus used when He said to the man, *you are well*, indicated the man remained well. This was not a temporary fix to the man’s problem.

Jews generally believed that all suffering was related to sin. If a person had sinned, he would suffer; conversely, if a person was suffering, he must have sinned. They based this on Deuteronomy 29, in which the Lord promised blessings for those who obeyed His commands and curses on those who disobeyed.

This connection between suffering and sin was the dilemma faced by Job and his friends. Job adamantly and repeatedly claimed he had not sinned, and yet, he was suffering. The friends concluded Job was deceiving himself and trying to deceive others as well.

This supposed connection between sin and suffering later caused the disciples to ask Jesus about a blind man: “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). Before healing the blind man, Jesus explained that his condition “came about so God’s works might be displayed in him” (John 9:3).

Although Jesus recognized that sin could lead to suffering, He did not always connect the two. There was not always a cause-and-effect relationship. Yet, neither did Jesus always disconnect the two.

Jesus warned the man, telling him not to *sin anymore*, lest he suffer *something worse* than he had endured for the

thirty-eight years. The something **worse** likely did not refer to an even more debilitating physical malady. Instead, Jesus was referring to the man suffering eternal judgment.

How did the man respond to what Jesus had said and to the miracle He had performed? He sought out the Jews and explained that Jesus was responsible for his healing. In doing so, the healed man was attempting to ingratiate himself to the religious authorities. At the same time, the man's response does indicate something positive. The Jews had asked in verse 12, "Who is this man who told you, 'Pick up your mat and walk'?" The man reported that **it was Jesus who had made him well**. In doing so, he focused on the Man who was a Healer.

The response of the Jews was predictable, based on their earlier accusatory question, "Who is this man?" They **began persecuting Jesus**. The verb tense indicates that after this event, they were continually persecuting Him.

This event at the Pool of Bethesda and the subsequent run-in with the Jews marked a shift in how John reported the miracles or signs in his Gospel. The earlier signs were for the benefit of the recipient, this healing introduced a new thread that hereafter served as a theme in his Gospel. The miracles of Jesus became a point of contention for the religious leaders. Rather than rejoicing, the Jewish authorities responded with disapproval, opposition, and, ultimately, with seeking the death of Jesus.

**Why is it sometimes easier to find fault instead of celebrating Jesus's working in a person's life?**

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### **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.)

