

Equality With God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. Our sermon passage today is John chapter 5. We are going to look at the whole chapter today, but we're going to begin just by reading the first 18 verses.

So if you have a Bible with you, turn to John chapter 5. If you don't, that's okay. We're going to have it on the screen. Of course, if you're at home, I encourage you to follow along. So, let me pray for us, and then I'll go ahead and read John 5 verses 1 through 18.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do pray that you would send your Spirit now to lead us into your truth and into your life. Lord, as we search the Scriptures this morning, we pray that in them we would see afresh the living face and hear the living voice of Jesus Christ, our Lord. In his name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Okay, John chapter 5 verses 1 through 18. Let me read this for us. After this, there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been an invalid for 38 years.

When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, Do you want to be healed? The sick man answered him, Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I'm going, another steps down before me. Jesus said to him, Get up, take up your bed, and walk. And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.

[1 : 4 7] Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed. But he answered them, The man who healed me, that man said to me, Take up your bed and walk. They asked him, Who is the man who said to you, Take up your bed and walk? Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, and there was a crowd in the place. Afterward, Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, See, you are well. Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you. The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, My Father is working until now, and I am working. This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

Now, it doesn't take too long. If you surf the internet, if you stream your favorite programs on TV, if you listen to podcasts, if you read newspapers and magazines, soon you're going to find that there are all sorts of people full of advice on how to live better, happier, more fulfilled lives.

Make more money, practice mindfulness, exercise regularly, the list goes on and on. So how do we choose which advice to listen to? And why listen to Jesus more than any of the others?

In our passage, we're introduced to two very different sorts of people. First, there's this man with paralysis. And for life and for wholeness, this man was looking to this pool. He had heard that the waters of this pool might have some kind of healing properties. In fact, if you're looking at a copy of a Bible, you'll notice in the ESV anyway that there's a marginal note that contains a verse that wasn't in the original manuscript of John, but it sort of preserves one of these maybe early traditions or rumors of what this man might have heard, that when the water was stirred, someone might get healed. So for this man with paralysis, he was looking to this pool for life and for wholeness.

But we're also introduced here to the religious authorities. In fact, from John chapter 5 onward, the religious authorities begin to play a bigger role in John's gospel as the conflict starts to grow between Jesus and the religious establishment in Jerusalem. And for this group, they weren't looking to pools. We might say they were looking to rules. The pathway to life, the pathway to wholeness for them was keeping the precepts, keeping the ordinances, keeping the traditions that had been passed down to them through the Jewish religious tradition. Now, I wonder if you can see yourself in either of those groups. Maybe like the religious authorities, you thrive with structure, with goals, with self-improvement programs, with how-to manuals. When it comes to finding life, you're pretty open to the rules.

[5 : 09] But some of us are drawn to the more mystical, the more experiential. And we might find ourselves a little more close to the man with paralysis, especially if we've come to see that following rules isn't always what it's promised. So there we are. We're hearing the rumors. We're gathering around the pool looking for wholeness, looking for healing, looking for life in something a little more experiential. But then Jesus shows up. Amidst the rumors about pools, amidst the traditions about rules, here comes Jesus with the startling claim of nothing less than equality with God and eternal life.

Now, we have to see that John chapter 5 has three parts to it, three sections. In verses 1 through 18 that we just read, here we find Jesus demonstrating his equality with God. But then in verses 19 through 30, we're going to see how Jesus defines his equality with God. And then in the last part of the chapter, we'll hear how Jesus defends his equality with God. And what this equality with God means is that wholeness in life can't ultimately be found in the rules of personal self-improvement or in the sort of experiences or pools of mystical experience. Wholeness and life is ultimately found in the person of Jesus in hearing his voice and responding to him.

So let's consider then this stunning claim of Jesus's equality with God. Let's look first at how Jesus demonstrates his equality with God in verses 1 through 18 that we read. And what's important to notice here in these verses is when all this takes place. When does it take place? It takes place on the Sabbath, the seventh day, the Jewish day of rest. Now that day stood as a reminder, the Sabbath stood as a reminder in the midst of the ordinary life that God was their creator. God had rested on the seventh day of the creation week, and so the people must rest knowing that God, their creator, will provide. But the Sabbath was also a reminder that God was their redeemer. Just as God had granted the people release and rest from their slavery in Egypt, so they must set aside one day in seven to experience again that rest and that release from labor. And ultimately, the Sabbath day had a future component too. God was leading his people to an eternal rest. As you get into the prophets in the Old Testament, you start to see that God was leading his people onward to an eternal rest, a new heavens and a new earth. And the Sabbath was the sign in the present of the glorious future to come that God had in store. So you see then that the Sabbath day was just massively important. It was a day rich with theological and experiential meaning. It was part and parcel of Jewish identity, and rightfully so. And on this day so full of meaning, Jesus comes to a place full of men and women longing for true Sabbath rest. Rest from physical disability, rest from illness, rest from emotional weariness, rest from social alienation and shame that their sickness had brought.

And Jesus finds a person who had been groaning for real Sabbath for a long time, 38 years. And he looks at this man, and I imagine Jesus sort of coming next to him, looking at the water with him, and then turning to him with a smile on his face saying, do you want to be healed?

Jesus' question is sort of like a friend pulling up to your apartment in a brand new car, and you're there sort of unlocking your rusty bicycle, and your friend sort of smiles out the window and says, hey, you want to ride to work? So Jesus looks at this man with love and says, you want to be healed?

[9 : 21] And the man says, yeah, yeah, but I can't make it into the pool on time. And Jesus in effect says, friend, you don't need a pool. You just need to hear my voice. Take up your bed and walk. And instantly the man who had yearned so long for real Sabbath wholeness, instantly he's made well.

He picks up his mat and walks for the first time in 38 years. Why? Because right there, just past the sheep gate, beside the pool of Bethesda, which by the way, archaeologists have found physical evidence for that site today, right there, the very God of the Sabbath meets this man in the flesh. The incarnate Word of God, Jesus.

But now here's what we have to see. Jesus didn't just do this just for the sake of this man. You know, Jesus could have healed him any old time, right? Any day of the week. But Jesus chooses the Sabbath day, and he chooses not just any Sabbath day, he chooses a Sabbath day in the middle of a national festival.

Now, which feast it is, John doesn't say, so that must not be all that important to the story. But we know it was an annual feast. And the point is, Jerusalem is crowded with worshipers. And on a day when Jerusalem is packed, on a Sabbath day, Jesus finds a man, heals him, and then tells him to walk through the city carrying his mat. In all probability, knowing that doing such a thing on such a day, at such a point in the year, would absolutely force the hand of the religious authorities of that day in the city. And that's exactly what happens. In verse 10, the Jews, and remember in John's gospel, the Jews means the Jewish religious authorities, most often in Jerusalem, they stop the healed man and they say, look, you can't do this. It's the Sabbath. What are you thinking? Now, their response takes a little bit of explaining, doesn't it? In the Old Testament, what the Sabbath prohibited, if you just read the Old Testament itself, what the Sabbath prohibited was what we would today call our jobs, right? If you were a farmer, you were supposed to stop farming. If you were a merchant, you were to stop buying and selling. But after the Babylonian exile, tradition started to develop and to be codified that sort of further defined what work was. And in an attempt to sort of protect Sabbath observance, over time, there were something like 39 categories of work that were identified that you couldn't do, that apparently broke the Sabbath law. And one of those 39 codified traditions, you guessed it, was carrying something. And so according to the religious authorities, according to their tradition, this man who had been healed was breaking the Sabbath.

And as they soon found out, Jesus was behind it all. Now, notice here, as Jesus demonstrates his equality with God, that he both heals and he challenges.

[12 : 24] He heals and he challenges. He heals this paralyzed man, right? But then he challenges him. What does he say to him when he finds him a little later in the temple precincts? Sin no more, lest something worse happen to you? And to the religious authorities, Jesus intentionally challenges them, but his challenge comes out of a desire to heal, so that they might stop looking to rules, but look to him.

So how does this demonstration of Jesus's equality with God strike you today? Is it a healing word for us? Is it a challenging word for us?

If it is a healing word, do you also hear the challenge? Don't let your new life in Christ simply end there. Follow him in obedience. You've come to him as Savior. Now follow him as Lord in the newness of life. But if it comes to you as a challenging word, do you also see that it is for your healing?

Yes, Jesus is saying that your own attempt at rules, at moral self-improvement, won't really get you anywhere with God. But that challenge is for your healing, so that you can let down your exhausting self-salvation project, and so that you can find rest in the healing voice of Jesus alone.

So Jesus here is demonstrating his equality with God. But now, as Jesus has sort of forced our hand, and as the controversy and conflict start to break out with the religious authorities, Jesus goes on in the second part of our passage, not just to demonstrate his equality, but to define it, to define his equality with God. Now here again, it's helpful to understand a little of the Jewish context of Jesus's day. You see, there was a theological discussion that developed in the Jewish tradition about whether God actually stopped working entirely on the Sabbath. In other words, what exactly does it mean to say that God rested on the Sabbath day? After all, if God ceased from all activity on the Sabbath, then wouldn't the universe just simply cease to exist altogether? Because as the Old Testament affirms again and again, the world is upheld by the power of God. So if God stopped working, poof, one day in seven we wouldn't exist. So God's rest on the Sabbath day must mean that he rested from that original work of creation. But as God, his ongoing work and activity sustaining creation continues. So then, we might say that God on the Sabbath day continues working. Man must not continue working, but God does. And so, in verse 17, when Jesus says, my Father's working until now, and I am working. Do you see there that he's drawing a very clear line? He's drawing a line, and on one side are created things, created humans, and on the other side is the Creator. And Jesus, although clearly a fully human person right in front of them, is saying, I'm on this side of the line.

[15 : 45] My Father is working on the Sabbath day. I work on the Sabbath day. Now, imagine how Jesus could have answered their complaints. He could have taken them back to the law of Moses, right, and argued against their tradition on exegetical grounds and said, hey, guys, you're blowing things out of proportion here. Or he could have appealed to the character of God's compassion and the fact that Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. And in other places in the Gospels, Jesus will approach Sabbath controversies with his fellow Jews in similar ways.

But here in John 5, he goes straight to the heart of the matter. He looks his opponent straight in the eye and says, does God work on the Sabbath? And I work on the Sabbath. Now, let's listen to how Jesus defines his relationship to the Father in verses 19 through 30. Let me read these quickly for us.

So Jesus said to them, truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. And those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge.

And my judgment is just because I seek not my own will, but the will of him who sent me. Now, notice three things about Jesus defining his equality with God here. First, it's clear from Jesus's words that the Father and the Son are distinct persons. You know, the Father and the Son aren't simply sort of two masks that God can kind of take on and off. Now God's the Father, now God's the Son. No, the Father and the Son are in a real relationship. And verses 19 and 20 show us that. The Son sees what the Father does. What the Father does, the Son does. The Father loves the Son. They're in a real relationship. They're distinct persons. But the second thing to notice is that the Son is as much God as the Father. Jesus mentions two exclusive prerogatives of God here. Two things that only God has the right to do. The authority first to give life and the authority to judge. And according to verses 21 and 22, the Son has those prerogatives, has that right as much as the Father. Verse 21, the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. So Jesus the Son, as much as the

[19 : 04] Father, has divine authority to give life. Verse 22, the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son. So Jesus the Son, as much as the Father, has divine authority to judge. So how do we hold these first two observations together? The Father and Son are distinct persons, but they are both fully God? Are there two gods? Well, no. The Bible's clear that there's only one God. You can't read the Old Testament and come away from that thinking that there's not just one God. Well, maybe the Son is sort of a little less God than the Father. But Jesus wouldn't be fully God with the full rights of Godness if he was a little less God, right? That doesn't make any sense. So Jesus here brings us face to face with what we now call the doctrine of the Trinity, that God is one in essence, but three in persons, Father, Son, and as the New Testament unfolds, we'll see the Holy Spirit. Now, is there a practical outcome of all of this? Well, this brings us to the third observation that we need to make about these verses as Jesus defines his equality with God. One, the Father and Son are distinct. Two, the

Father and Son are both God. Both have full authority to judge and give life. Three, what this means is that we cannot honor God without honoring the Son. Look again at verse 23. Why has God the Father entrusted all judgment to God the Son? Jesus says that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.

Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Now, friends, let that sink in. It is impossible, Jesus says, to honor God the Father if we do not honor the Son. Do you see what Jesus is saying here? Any religion or spirituality that doesn't put Jesus in the center does not ultimately honor God? Now, I know that's a fairly offensive thing to say, but it's not something Christians just made up to sort of make people angry. It's what Jesus himself taught. You can't fully honor the Father unless you honor the Son. Now, that's not to say that there aren't some true things in other religions and other worldviews. That's not to say we're not supposed to be ultimately respectful and show everyone dignity and honor who believe different things than us. But Jesus cuts a very clear line here and says, the only way to truly honor the Father is to honor me. That is challenging, absolutely.

It was challenging to Jesus' first hearers, and it's still challenging today. But just as we were saying, Jesus challenges us to heal us. If Jesus is the only Son of the Father, then let's listen to what Jesus says in verse 24. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my voice and believes him who sent me has eternal life.

He doesn't come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. And in verses 25 through 30, Jesus will say that at the end of history, his will be the voice that opens the graves, and his will be the voice that utters the verdict over our lives.

[22 : 31] God the Son is God, and he will act in all of his godness when the time comes. But what will be true at the end of the ages is also true right now, that those who hear his voice and believe are granted eternal life.

Jesus says, even now the dead are hearing my voice, and those who hear pass from death to life. Just like the man beside the pool heard the voice of Jesus say, get up, even now Jesus continues to speak from heaven through the words of Scripture, through the proclamation of the church, and Jesus continues to say, get up, leave death, and come into life. Step away from the pools and the rules, and come find real, lasting Sabbath rest and wholeness in me, the God of the Sabbath.

You see, the good news, friends, is that if Jesus is God, then eternal life can be had as a gift just by responding to his voice. He has life in himself.

And as the gospel of John unfolds, what do we see? That Jesus, God the Son, with all authority to give life, with all authority to judge, is willing to lay down his own life for sinners. He's willing to be judged for us in order to grant us that eternal life. So now we too can get up and walk, so that we can get up and walk in the newness of life. Paul says in 2 Corinthians, if anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come.

So then Jesus demonstrates and defines his equality with God. But to conclude then in the third part of our passage in verses 31 through 47, Jesus now defends his equality with God.

[24 : 30] You see, the reality is Jesus knows that his claims here are massive. As he says in verse 31, we're going to look at verses 31 through 35 first.

He says in verse 31, look, if I bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. Jesus is admitting that like, look, if I'm just walking around saying, I'm God, you probably shouldn't pay attention to me. But he says, it's not just me.

Jesus marshals in this section three witnesses as evidence to his claims. First, the first witness he points to is John the Baptist. In verses 32 through 35, Jesus says, there's another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. You sent to John, that is John the Baptist, and he's born witness to the truth. Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a bright and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. Now, even Jesus's opponents respected John the Baptist. They respected him as a prophet from God. And what was John the Baptist's message? Ultimately, his message was, there's one who's coming after me whose sandals I'm not worthy to untie. I'm preparing the way for the Lord to come. And when John finally set his eyes on Jesus, what did John say? Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The Jewish authorities of Jesus' day respected John the Baptist, and Jesus says, well, for starters, why don't you just listen to what he was saying about me? And if you're wrestling with the claims of Christ today, I wonder if you might consider the witness of some Christians that you respect.

Is there someone in your life or in your profession that you might pause and consider? Does their life point you in some small way to consider the truth of Jesus's claims?

[26 : 34] If it's true for them, might it also be plausible for you? Now, Jesus admits this isn't a great sort of, this is just a first step, right? Humans are flawed.

John the Baptist wasn't perfect. But might it at least open the door a little bit for you? And for those of us who are Christians, do we see our lives a bit like John the Baptist?

Pointing others not to ourselves, but to Christ? How can your life, how can my life, how can our life as a church bear witness to Christ like John the Baptist's life did? In the rest of John's gospel, he'll start to, Jesus will start to tell us that.

In the upper room, before he's crucified, Jesus will say, love one another. That's how the world will know that you're my followers, if you love one another and if you serve one another. But then Jesus goes on to the second witness. And the second witness is the works that he's done.

Let's read verse 36. He says, So Jesus is pushing them here. He's challenging us. Have you investigated Jesus' works?

[27 : 55] Jesus had just healed a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years. Would his opponents have the open-mindedness to look past their rules, look past their preconceived notions, and consider the challenge that Jesus poses? And look at what's right in front of them.

You know, it's very interesting that in the earliest testimonies to Jesus that we have outside of the New Testament, nearly all of them mentioned that Jesus worked miracles, and practically none of them dispute that claim. For the witnesses closest to Jesus, his miraculous works weren't really in question. And for us today, perhaps the greatest work that we need to reckon with is Jesus' own resurrection from the dead. Jesus claims to have life in himself, and he claims to have the authority to give life. And the question we have to ask is, the question on which, as Paul will say, the whole thing rises or falls is, did Jesus rise from the dead? Did he work that mighty work?

And I don't think we can be spiritually or even intellectually honest with ourselves until we've given the resurrection of Jesus a fair evaluation. And for those of us who are Christians, those of us who believe in the resurrection, who believe in Jesus' works, do we live our lives as echoes of that work?

You know, God doesn't save us by our good works, but he does save us for good works. Jesus has prepared good works in advance for us to do. And again, as Jesus says later in John's gospel, it is our works of love. It is our works of service, our works of love for one another and love for the world that will draw people's hearts and minds to consider Christ. Jesus then calls the third witness in for his defense.

After John the Baptist, after his own works, finally Jesus calls in the words of the Father himself, the words of the Father in Scripture. So let's read the rest of John chapter 5, verses 37 through 47. Jesus says, And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you've never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you. For you do not believe the one whom he has sent. You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life. And it is they that bear witness about me. Yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

[30 : 42] I do not receive glory from people, but I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I've come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you'll receive him. How can you believe when you receive glory from one another and don't seek the glory that comes from the only God? Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you, Moses, on whom you set your hope. For if you believe Moses, you would believe me. For he wrote of me.

But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words? Jesus's opponents, you see, considered themselves experts in the scriptures, and therefore experts in the word of God. But Jesus says, the scriptures, the voice of God, is ultimately about me.

Now, what did Jesus mean by this? On the one hand, there are many explicit prophecies about the coming Messiah that Jesus fulfilled. Some of those found in the very writings of the first five books of the Old Testament, the law of Moses. But in addition to the prophecies, there are overarching stories and themes that Jesus fulfills as well. Every prophet bringing a word from God. Every priest offering a sacrifice to reconcile us to God. Every king coming with the rule of God to put down injustice and to rescue the people. All of these Old Testament stories are part of a grand narrative that finds its climax in Jesus, the true prophet and priest and king. So if you're genuinely seeking God, take up the invitation that Jesus makes here. Read the scriptures for yourself. But don't read them as a big pile of rules that you have to follow in order to earn eternal life. Jesus says, that's not the right way to read scripture. And of course, don't read it as a big sort of pool, a big mash of collected religious experiences. No, no, Jesus says, read it as a witness, as the voice of the Father witnessing to me, the person of Christ. Put Christ in the center of your study of scripture. And maybe for the first time, the Bible will start to make a lot more sense to you and start to be heard as the good news that it is. Not the mountain we need to ascend to get to God, but the story of a God who's come down to rescue us. And maybe as you read, you'll start to hear the voice of Jesus say in your heart, do you want to be healed? And if you hear his voice, friends, do not harden your heart, but enter the rest that he offers through faith. And for those of us who are followers of Christ, those of us who've heard his voice in scripture say, get up, take your mat, walk. Friends, remember we have passed from death to life. So let's keep listening to his voice in scripture. And then let's go. Let's walk. Let's witness to him with our life. And let's witness to him with our works. And let's witness to him with our words. And let's live in the eternal life that we know only hearing the voice of Jesus can bring. Because Jesus is one with the Father, equal with God, and he's come. Let's pray together.

Our Lord Jesus, we thank you for these moments in the Gospels where you come forth and you give us such clear teaching about your true divine identity. Lord, soften our hearts to hear your voice that we might pass from death to life. Lord, perhaps there are those hearing your voice even now.

By your spirit, would you liberate them to reach out to you in faith and cling to you. Lord, for those of us who've heard your voice, help us to walk in the newness of life that you bring.

[35 : 17] And so testify to your glory and your goodness. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen.