

John

Lesson #6

The Pool of Bethesda

(5: 1 – 47)

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Review

In Lesson #5 we tackled the story of the Samaritan woman, an outcast (as both a Samaritan and a marginalized woman) who had been married five times, and the man she was living with was not her husband. She was the village whore, the polar opposite of Nicodemus: whereas, Nicodemus was knowledgeable but modest, the Samaritan woman was ignorant but brash; whereas, Nicodemus resided in Jerusalem, the center of piety and power, the Samaritan woman lived in Sychar, an anonymous, small village in “unclean” territory.

Unlike Jesus’ subtle and insightful exchange with Nicodemus, Jesus’ jousting with the Samaritan woman was startling, as they traded insults. Both the encounter with Nicodemus and the encounter with the Samaritan woman lead to truth, but they arrived by very different paths.

Preview

In Lesson #6 Jesus heads back to Jerusalem where he meets a man at the pool of Bethesda who has been profoundly ill for 38 years. The man believes, as do others, that when the water stirs, the first person in the water will be healed. But someone always gets there first!

The sick man has enormous faith: he has watched the water intently for 38 years, looking for the first ripple, *believing* that the water will heal him. But he has faith in the wrong thing. Notice how Jesus redirects the man's vision from looking at the water to looking at *him*. And when he does, the man is healed.

The healing takes place on the Sabbath, and of course this stirs up immediate opposition from the religious authorities. Jesus counters not with a story, a witty retort or a brilliant one-liner—as he so often does in the synoptic gospels—but with a lengthy theological discourse, reinforcing Jesus' identity and his relationship with God the Father.

“After this, there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep Gate a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes. In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled [waiting for the stirring of the water, for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.] One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years . . .

“When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be well?’ The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I’m on my way, someone else gets down there before me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Rise, take up your mat, and walk.’ Immediately the man became well, took up his mat and walked.”

(5: 1-9a)

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**Robert Bateman, *The Pool of Bethesda* (oil on canvas), 1877.
Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.**

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Jerusalem's "Pool of Bethesda," with the ruins of the Byzantine church.

Photography by Berthold Werner

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For centuries the exact location our story’s “Pool of Bethesda” was unknown.

In the late 19th century the German archaeologist, Conrad Schick, discovered a large pool adjacent to St. Anne’s Church in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem. Later excavations in the 1960s discovered the remains of Byzantine and Crusader churches, Hadrian’s Temple of Asclepius (the Greek god of healing), small healing pools and a second large pool. There are, indeed, five porticoes at the site.

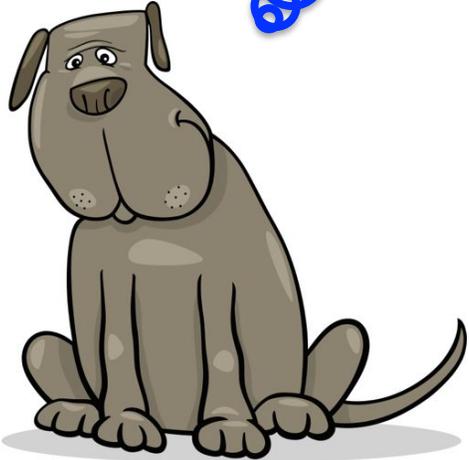
During the 1st century B.C. the Roman garrison at the Antonia fortress likely converted the complex into an asclepion, similar to a “healing spa” in our day.

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So in centuries past the Pool of Bethesda functioned as a Greek/Roman asclepion, a healing center.

That explains why all those sick people came to the water to be healed!





**Look closely at our text,
as it is highlighted it.**

“After this, there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep Gate a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes. In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled [waiting for the stirring of the water, for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.] One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years . . .

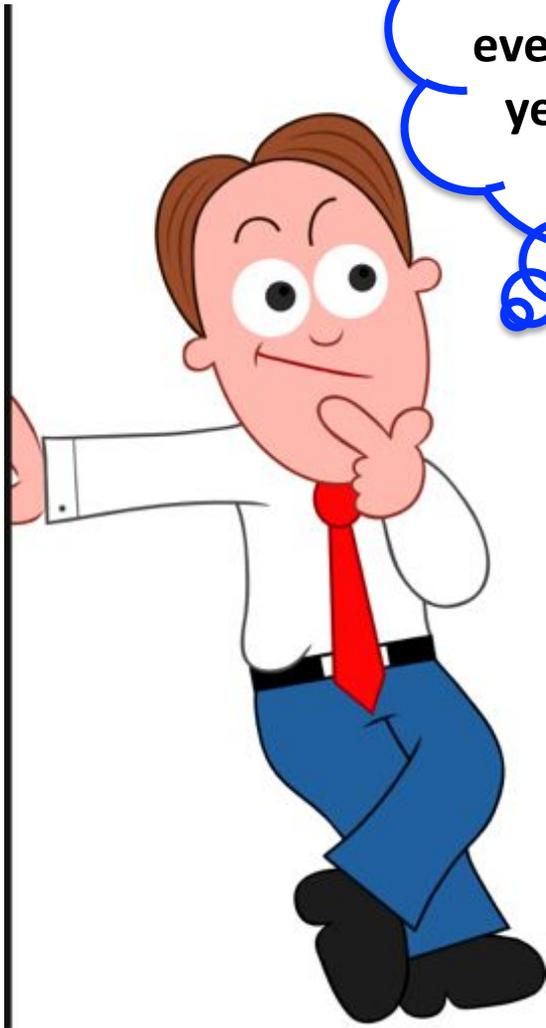


•The “**feast of the Jews**” was probably Pentecost, suggested by invoking Moses and the Law in 5: 45-46, which reads:

“Do not think I will accuse you before the Father; the one who will accuse you is Moses, in whom you have placed your hope. For if you had believed Moses, you would have believed me, because he wrote about me.”

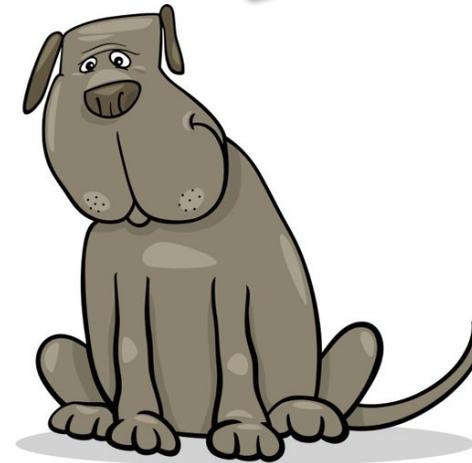
•The name “**Bethseda**” in Hebrew means “house of mercy”, presumably due to the healing qualities of the water.

•The verse that begins “**waiting for the stirring of the water . . .**” only appears in much later manuscripts, and it is very different stylistically from the Johannine writings: it is a later, explanatory addition to John’s text.



Notice that the sick man had been at the pool every day for the past 38 years. Now, that man had faith!

But it was faith in the wrong thing!



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“When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be well?’ The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I’m on my way, someone else gets down there before me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Rise, take up your mat, and walk.’ Immediately the man became well, took up his mat and walked.”

(5: 1-9a)

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This is the 3rd of 7 of Jesus' "signs" (σημείον, *sémeion*), a term in John's gospel for Jesus' "miracles" and "wondrous deeds," once again signifying Jesus' life-giving word.

As Jesus healed the royal official's son by simply speaking, so does Jesus heal the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda.



**Palma Giovane, *The Pool* (oil on canvas), 1592.
Collezione Molinari Pradelli, Castenaso.**

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“Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who was cured, ‘It is the sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.’ He answered them, ‘The man who made me well told me, ‘take up your mat and walk.’ They asked him, ‘Who is the man who told you, ‘Take it up and walk?’ The man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away, since there was a crowd there. After this Jesus found him in the temple area and said to him, ‘Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you’ . . .

“The man went and told the Jews that Jesus was the one who had made him well. Therefore, the Jews began to persecute Jesus because he did this on a sabbath. But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is at work until now, so I am at work.’ For this reason the Jews tried all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath but he also called God his own father, making himself equal to God.”

(5: 9b-18)



In Genesis 2: 1-3 we read:

“Thus the heavens and the earth and all their array were completed. On the seventh day God completed the work he had been doing; he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had undertaken. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation.”

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And in Exodus 20: 8-9, the “Ten Commandments,” we read:

“Remember the sabbath day—keep it holy. Six days you may labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your god. You shall not do any work, either you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your animal, or the resident alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord has blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.”

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Observing the Sabbath is not optional: God commands it. In traditional Jewish teaching at the time of Jesus, as well as today, observing Shabbat has three purposes:

- 1. It commemorates God's creation of the universe.**
- 2. It commemorates the Israelite's redemption from slavery in Egypt.**
- 3. It is a foretaste of *Olam Haba*, the Messianic Age.**

Time and again in the Hebrew Scriptures the Israelites fail to observe Shabbat, and very bad things happen as a result.

God is quite clear on this.



But isn't it also true that in Jewish teaching human need trumps ritual law? Jesus performed an act of mercy, so why would that be wrong?

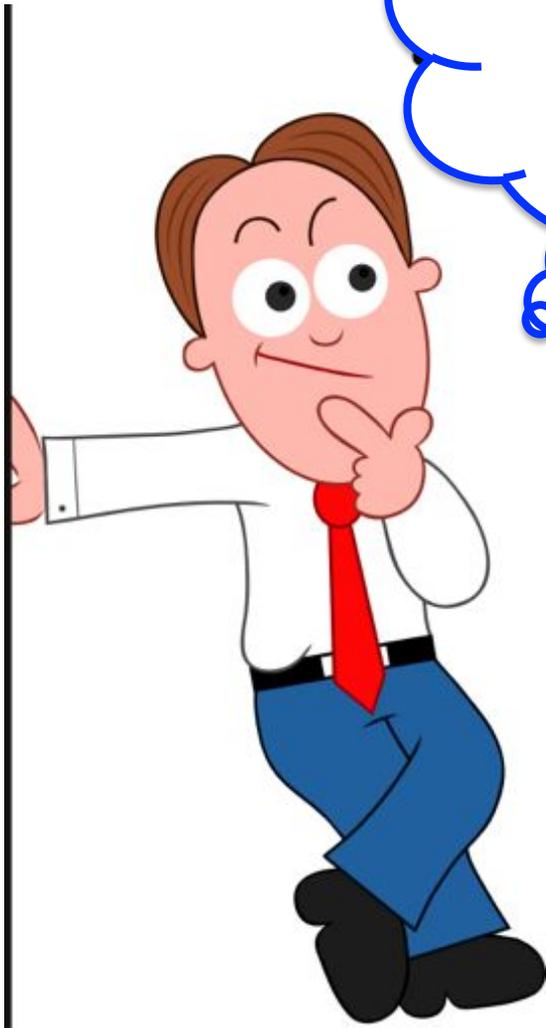
I would have helped the sick man!



You're correct: human need does trump ritual law. If an ox had fallen into a ditch, one would be obligated to get him out; or if a man had fallen into a pond and was drowning, one would be obligated to rescue him—even on Shabbat.

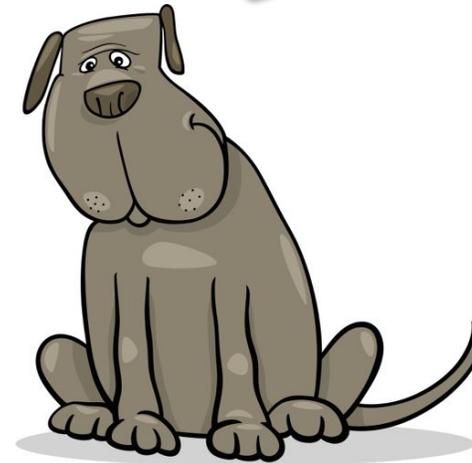
But the man in this story had been coming to the Pool of Bethesda every day for 38 years! Jesus could have healed him on the previous day, or on the day after Shabbat. The “human need” argument does not apply.

Jesus is clearly wrong in what he did. Only God can override this commandment.



Ah, ha! But perhaps that's the point. In John's view, Jesus is God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

And in the story, Jesus is condemned for saying exactly that.



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At this point Jesus responds, not with a story, a witty retort or a brilliant one-liner—as he so often does in the synoptic gospels—but with a lengthy theological discourse, reinforcing Jesus’ identity and his relationship with God the Father.

“Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Amen. Amen, I say to you, a son cannot do anything on his own, but only what he sees his father doing; for what he does, his son will do also. For the Father loves his Son and shows him everything that he himself does, and he will show him greater works than these, so that you may be amazed. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives life, so also does the Son give life to whomever he wishes. Nor does the Father judge anyone, but he has given all judgment to his Son, so 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. Amen, Amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life and will not come to condemnation, but has passed from death to life.’”

(5: 19-24)

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In the patriarchal world of the Hebrew Scriptures—and to a lesser extent—the Roman world of the New Testament, a 1st-born son’s relationship to his father is unique.

The patriarch heads his extended family of wives, brothers, sons, daughters, cousins, nieces and nephews. His eldest son is his “right hand,” the one who will succeed him as the family patriarch. The larger the family, the more power and influence the patriarch wields; hence, arranged marriages with other powerful and influential families extends the patriarch’s power and influence.

King Solomon’s 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11: 3) do not reflect Hefneresque promiscuity, but carefully arranged alliances with other tribal warlords, sealed through marriage and the birth of additional sons.

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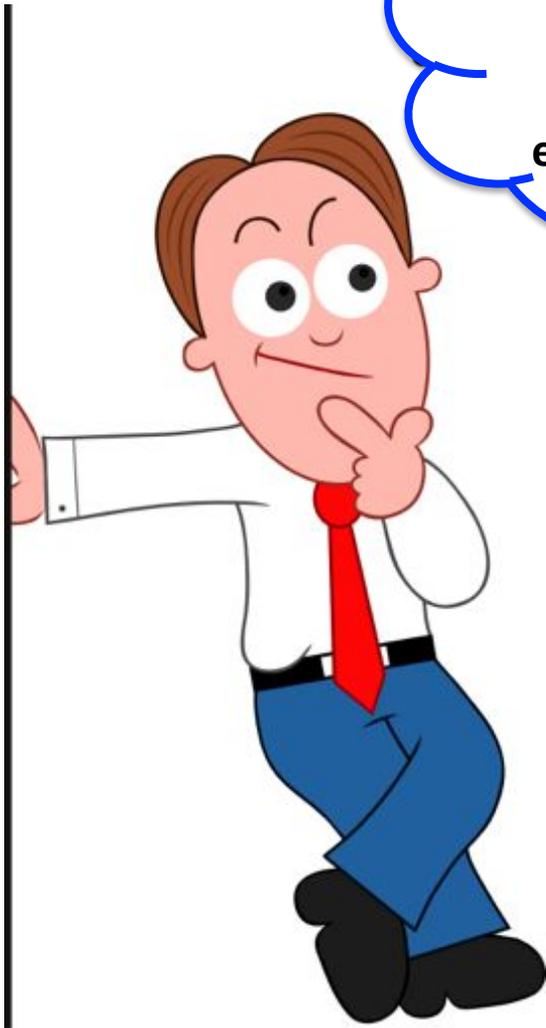


In such a tribal, patriarchal culture, the eldest son—his father’s “right hand”—is given authority to speak on behalf of his father in matters both business and personal.

Later in John 14 Philip will say, *“Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us”* (14: 8), to which Jesus replies, *“Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”* (14: 9).

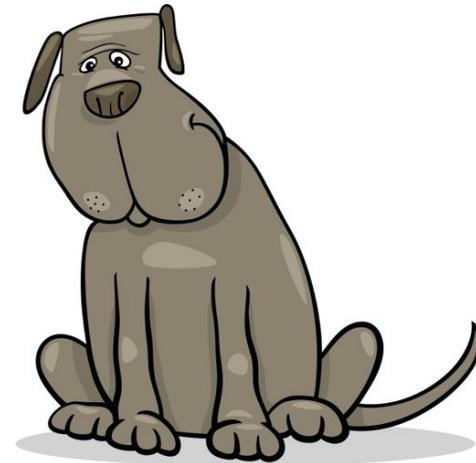
Here, Jesus claims oneness with the Father on two levels:

1. In a theological sense, as John’s prologue established, the Father and the Son are consubstantial, one and the same.
2. In a cultural sense, one approaches the Father through the Son, and when the Son speaks, he does so on behalf of the Father; thus, seeing the Son, you have seen the Father.



Now I'm beginning to understand. John's prologue establishes Jesus' identity as God incarnate, and John presents Jesus using the father/son relationship to establish his human identity and authority.

That's pretty deep theology!



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C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

C.S. Lewis, the great Oxford literary critic and Christian apologist, faces Jesus' words head-on, when he writes in *Mere Christianity*:

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice."

(London: Collins, 1952, pp. 54-56)

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“Amen, Amen, I say to you, the 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 just as the Father has life in himself, so also he gave to his Son the possession of life in himself. And he gave him power to exercise judgment, because he is the **Son of Man**. Do not be amazed at this, because the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation. I cannot do anything on my own; I judge as I hear, and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will but the will of the one who sent me.”

(5: 25-30)

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As Jesus continues his discourse, he identifies himself not only as the Son of God, but as the “Son of Man.” We have heard this self-referential phrase in the synoptic gospels, as well as in John.

The book of Daniel¹ introduces the “Son of Man” as a distinct apocalyptic character:

¹ Daniel is classified within the “apocalyptic genre” so popular during Jesus’ day. No fewer than eight Daniel manuscripts have been identified among three of the eleven caves at Qumran.

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In the book, Daniel has a series of visions, and:

“As the visions during the night continued, I saw coming with the clouds of heaven one like a son of man. When he reached the Ancient of Days and was presented before him, he received dominion, splendor, and kingship; all nations, peoples and tongues will serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, his kingship, one that shall not be destroyed.”

(7: 13-14)

In the gospels, only Jesus uses the term “Son of Man,” and he uses it only in reference to himself.

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“Amen, Amen, I say to you, the 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 just as the Father has life in himself, so also he gave to his Son the possession of life in himself. And he gave him power to exercise judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, because **the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation.** I cannot do anything on my own; I judge as I hear, and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will but the will of the one who sent me.”

(5: 25-30)

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The book of Revelation, the last of the Johannine writings, develops vv. 28-29, portraying the resurrection and judgment of the dead—both the good and the bad—in its closing chapters:

“Next I saw a large white throne and the one who was sitting on it. The earth and the sky fled from his presence and there was no place for them. I saw the dead, the great and the lowly, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. Then another scroll was opened, the book of life. The dead were judged according to their deeds, by what was written in the scrolls. The sea gave up its dead; then Death and Hades gave up their dead. All the dead were judged according to their deeds.”

(20: 11-13)

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**Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment* (fresco), 1536-1541.
Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.**

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“If I testify on my own behalf, my testimony cannot be verified. But there is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that the testimony he gives on my behalf is true. You sent emissaries to John, and he testified to the truth. I do not accept testimony from a human being, but I say this so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and for a while you were content to rejoice in his light. But I have testimony greater than John’s

“The works that the Father gave me to accomplish, these works that I perform testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. Moreover, the Father who sent me has testified on my behalf. But you have never heard his voice nor seen his form, and you do not have his word remaining in you, because you do not believe in the one whom he has sent. You search the scriptures, because you think you have eternal life through them; even they testify on my behalf. But you do not want to come to me to have life.”

(5: 31-40)

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Deuteronomy 19: 15 tells us that *“a charge shall stand only on the testimony of two or three witnesses.”* Here, Jesus provides four, in addition to himself:

1. John the Baptist, who was a *“burning and shining lamp”* (5: 32-35).
2. The *“works”* that Jesus accomplished; that is, the *“signs”* (σημείον, *sémeion*), which are greater than John’s testimony (5: 36).
3. The Father *“who sent me has testified on my behalf”* (5: 37-38).
4. The Scriptures, for as Philip said, Jesus is *“the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets”* (5: 39; 1: 45).

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“I do not accept human praise; moreover, I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I came in the name of my Father, but you do not accept me; yet if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe, when you accept praise from another and do not seek the praise that comes from the only God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who will accuse you is Moses, in whom you have placed your hope. For if you had believed Moses you would have believed me, because he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”

(5: 41-47)

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Jesus concludes by highlighting the dichotomies of belief/unbelief and acceptance/rejection, two of the many opposing concepts in John's gospel.

Jesus says, in effect, "I have presented you with four witnesses to validate my claims: 1) John the Baptist; 2) the "works" I have performed; 3) God the Father; and 4) the Scriptures.

If you do not accept these, you will never accept me; and if you do not accept me, you will never see "life."

Questions for discussion and thought

1. Why did the sick man—and all the others—go to the Pool of Bethesda for healing every day?
2. How did Jesus heal the man?
3. Why did the Jewish authorities stop the healed man as he was carrying his mat? Wasn't it rather petty?
4. How does Jesus justify healing the man on the Sabbath?
5. When Jesus asserts his identity as the Son of God, what evidence does he present to validate his claim?

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