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John 5:1–9, ESV.

5 After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 6 Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. 7 In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. 8 One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. 9 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?” 10 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 am going another steps down before me.” 11 Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” 12 And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.

John 5:6b-9, New American Bible, Revised Edition.

6 Jesus said to him, “Do you want to be well?” 7 The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me.” 8 Jesus said to him, “Rise, take up your mat, and walk.” 9 Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked.

John 5:6b–9, Literal Standard Version.

6 Jesus He says to him, “Do you wish to become whole?” 7 The ailing man answered Him, “Lord, I have no man, that, when the water may be troubled, he may put me into the pool, and while I am coming, another goes down before me.” 8 Jesus says to him, “Rise, take up your pallet, and be walking”; 9 and immediately the man became whole, and he took up his pallet, and was walking.

Never be a victim.

I like to use the English Standard Version of the Bible in my sermons. But when I went to grab today's passage out of my electronic version of the ESV, I was surprised. In a subtle but critical way, the translation was rather misleading. That mistranslation gets at the heart of what the passage is all about. Let's start by stepping through the problem. In the ESV, Jesus comes across a man who was lying near a number of disabled people who have been reduced to begging for a living, as their culture did not have a dignified way of caring for people with disabilities that kept them from working. Jesus sees a man who has been there for thirty-eight years. The man is lying down, suggesting that his disability is perhaps neurological, that he must be paralyzed, perhaps from the waist down. Then Jesus says: *Do you want to be healed?* The man says something that needs explanation: *Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.* This passage probably means that there is a pool of water that is considered holy. When the water gets stirred up, it is believed that God is acting, perhaps by having an angel agitate the water. That is why the man has been waiting to get in there. But the problem is that every time the water is stirred up and therefore activated by God, somebody else jumps in before the paralyzed man can get someone to help him get into the

water. He keeps being victimized. So, *Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.”*⁹ And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. To summarize: Jesus asks the man if he wants to be healed. The man indicates yes by claiming that others keep victimizing him by not giving him a chance to get into the water. Jesus then cures the man, making it unnecessary for him to even get into the water in the first place. The man walks away.

But this is not a correct translation. Consider our second version, which is from a Catholic Bible, the New American Bible, the Revised Edition. This is closer to being correct. It says: ⁶*Jesus said to him, “Do you want to be well?”*⁷ *The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me.”*

⁸*Jesus said to him, “Rise, take up your mat, and walk.”*⁹ Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked. Here is the important difference. In this translation, Jesus does not ask the man if he wants to be healed. Jesus asks if he wants to be “made well”. Then, the man isn’t healed, he is “made well”.

Now, let’s look at the third translation. It’s from a Bible translation that not very many people are familiar with. It says: ⁶*Jesus says to him, “Do you wish to become whole?”*⁷*The ailing man answered Him, “Lord, I have no man, that, when the water may be troubled, he may put me into the pool, and while I am*

coming, another goes down before me.” **8** Jesus says to him, “*Rise, take up your pallet, and be walking*”; **9** *and immediately the man became whole, and he took up his pallet, and was walking.* This is closer still to what the original Greek says. Jesus asks the man if he wants to become whole, and then the man is indeed made whole. The point is that the Greek word that is translated as to heal in the ESV, to be made well in the Catholic Bible, or to be made whole in the Literal Standard Version is the word *ugieś* - and it means to be made sound or whole. It doesn’t mean to be healed or cured. In truth, Jesus heals the man, but it’s not because Jesus literally asks if this is what the man wants. I will get back to this.

When I was just out of college, taking a year off between undergraduate and graduate school, I was working as a programmer in San Francisco. I happened to get car and rental insurance from a man who was quite elderly. I met him in his office; I believe he was a Farmers or a State Farm agent. He mentioned that he was 92, and he told me up front, before we even talked about insurance, that he only worked at his age so that he could continue to advise young people. He said he certainly did not need the money. He said that when a client was older, he sold that person insurance over the phone, but that with younger people, he would always meet in person. I was the sort of young guy who didn’t mind someone giving me advice, so I said that was fine. Mind you, my

parents were unsophisticated people who, in many ways, did not prepare me well for the practicalities of the real world. This man proceeded to give me all kinds of advice about life. Two things stuck with me over the years. The first was that I should always live below my means and save. Even if it was just a little bit, I should invest some money every single month, mostly in the stock market. When he learned that I was an engineering type, he said that I should try to figure out what stocks in technology would be likely to do well over the coming years and buy those. He said that if I saved and invested, then when I was older, if God told me to drop everything and to serve him, then I would be able to do so. I did follow his suggestion. The second piece of advice was less practical. This man, by the way, while he was indeed very old, was clear-headed, healthy looking, and very engaging. I listened intently to him. He told me to never let other people bother me. He said that other people couldn't really do anything to me – only God can control my life and my future. He said to never be a victim. Don't ever think that other people can control you, can decide your future, can make you suffer, can limit what you can do. Do not ever decide that other people have cheated you, that you deserve some sort of payment or special treatment because you have been victimized. He repeated: never become a victim. Only you and God can decide what you can and will do. This man, whose name I do

not remember, must have passed away many decades ago. But he impacted my life in a big way. I saved and invested. When I met Wendy, we did the same. And, I have always known that whatever I feel I should do, I can do it – as long as I am confident that it is what God wants of me.

Let's get back to our Bible passage. Jesus does not ask this man if he wants to be healed of whatever medical condition is making him unable to move about. Importantly, Jesus uses a more general word and thereby asks a bigger question. Do you want to be whole again? Do you want to be sound? The man responds with a very narrow, practical reply. He says that he has been a victim, that other people have prevented him from doing what he feels he needs to do, and that is bathe in a pool of healing water. Jesus replies by healing the man physically. Jesus does indeed cure him of whatever is wrong with his body. But Jesus is doing this so that he can provide something bigger, something far more important. Jesus gives the man the ability to be whole, to be sound. Jesus allows the man to no longer be a victim.

There is one more thing about this elderly man who gave me advice that I would like to share with you. His office wasn't cluttered. It didn't look like a place where a man had spent seventy years being a professional. He didn't collect books, papers, awards, degrees, knickknacks, photographs, and countless things

he hadn't used in decades. His office was sparse. He had a desk, a small one, made of steel. He had a bookshelf with almost nothing on it. I remember only one photograph; he told me it was his son who had died twenty years before. There were no personal computers back then. He had no typewriter. His chair was wooden and straight-backed; I suspected that it was a kitchen chair. There was a filing cabinet and after he filled out some paperwork on me, he put it in a manilla folder and dropped it in the filing cabinet. He had a phone, a black one with a rotary dial. He noticed me noticing that his office had very little in it. He smiled and said that this was the way to live, to collect only what you need, to try to not need things, and to remember that God will give you what you need – and it won't be much. I have not done a good job of following this third piece of advice. Wendy can attest to that. She routinely struggles to get me to dispose of old books, broken stuff, things that don't work anymore, and things that we don't even remember where they came from. We went through a phase of tossing out old paperwork. I do tend to get a sense of security out of stuff. I need to remember that God will indeed give me everything I need - and it won't be much.

If we don't need stuff in life, if we don't need the approval of anyone but God, if we live for the things of God's world and not the things of the world of people, it will be hard for us to be victims. People can't cheat us out of things we

don't want or need, like money, power, or earthly respect. People can't cheat us if we don't see them as having any true power over us. True power comes from God. God does not want us to be victims. God wants us depending on him only for what we need and for what truly matters to us – and God will never victimize us, because God is pure goodness. God doesn't compete with us. God isn't envious of us. God doesn't want to take anything from us. Unlike many humans we come across in life, God only wants us to live in joy. Please pray with me.

God, there is one thing that I need from you constantly. I need you to make me whole, to make me sound. Let me never become so broken that I see myself as a victim. Let me know that there are only two beings who control my future: you and me. Fill me with your grace, lift me up with confidence in myself and in you. Touch the souls and the minds of those who mean me harm and replace their vengeance with joy. Let me trust you to give me all that I need. May I live each day knowing that all I truly need is to keep you in my life. I do not need stuff in my life any more than I need the approval of other humans. I do not need people to make my way for me in life; you will do that. I do not need people to compensate me for things they have not let me have; you are already giving me the things I need. God, let me pass on to others your grace and the news that only you and no humans can control the eternal destiny of any person. Amen.