

"THE MAN BY THE POOL"

INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago I stood in the city of Jerusalem where this scene is supposed to have taken place. It's all different now, with the pool in a courtyard. In the time of Jesus, it was an open public place near the Sheep Gate. From time to time, the water bubbled up, and this was thought to be caused by some divine action. And the people believed that if a sick person could bathe in the pool immediately after this turbulence of the water, he would be healed. So the sick gathered in large numbers and five porches were built for their convenience. There was a man there who had been sick for thirty-eight years, and he had never been able to get healed, but he still waited.

One day Jesus of Nazareth came along and said to this man, "Do you want to be healed?" The sick man answered that he had no one to help him and that someone always got into the pool ahead of him. Then Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your pallet and walk". And the man was healed!

There is a similarity between that situation and ours. We too are sick and we too look for some special healing or some special power to make us whole again. How desperately we need one to come along and restore us to health. Suppose we look at this incident taken from John's Gospel and consider it in light of our modern needs.

BELIEF IN MAGIC

The first thing to notice is the belief in magic. They thought that a troubling of the water would cure them. You may say that we have gone far beyond such superstition. But don't be too sure that we have shaken off all elements of magical expectation in finding answers to some of our problems.

Medicine is certainly one field where science has made fantastic contributions and our medical knowledge helps us perform miracles of healing. But in our attitudes toward medicine, there is a vast amount of searching for answers and expecting healings that are far from scientific. We have been promised drugs which will cure worry and and restore confidence with no bad effects. When the tranquilizers were first announced, it looked as if the psychiatrist and the professional counsellor would soon be out of business. A man could take a pill and suddenly feel at peace with himself and the world. Why would he ever need the help of a psychologist or a minister? But we have discovered that it is not easy and not so simple. The drugs only touch the surface and give us temporary relief. They do not actually resolve the conflict which caused the trouble in the first place. How many there are who look for some prescription which will work miracles and serve as a cure for worry and tension.

Turn to the problem of losing weight. So many Americans are anxious to find a way to reduce because we're too rich - we eat too much, and we get too fat. Some time ago a man wrote a book about calories not counting, the theory being that you could eat whatever you pleased and still lose weight. I remember seeing a reference somewhere to an indictment issued against the publishers of that book for having promised things that could not be fulfilled. A few years ago somebody wrote a book about praying our weight away. That would be a good trick if we could do it. How eagerly we reach out for an answer to the problem of overweight that involves little or no discipline.

According to the movies and the television programs, the answer seems to be alcohol. I don't know how it is with you, but so often I get upset of hearing people who are caught up in some strain or difficulty saying, "We need a drink". With some it seems to be the solution to every problem in life, until as Billy Graham one time predicted, when these people come to die, they will probably call for the bartender!

What we are after is happiness without character. We seek contentment without

having to pay a price for it. And if this is not putting us into the realm of magical expectation, I don't know what else to call it.

A man consulted a psychiatrist about the best thing to do for his children. He expected to receive advice about their training, their schooling, and the cultural advantages he ought to give them. But the psychiatrist, who was a very wise man, said simply, "The best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother". This is something we sometimes forget. The child who lives in a home where love is real is blessed far beyond the child whose father can write him a handsome check or give him all that money can buy. The healing many need is something magic cannot give.

FAULT OF OTHER PEOPLE

A second thing for us to notice is that this man by the pool thought the trouble was the fault of other people. He couldn't get into the pool. They didn't help him. He felt a measure of self pity and self pity is always self-defeating.

I suppose that most of us have envy in our hearts for some people. I remember when I was in college, I went through a time in my sophomore year of feeling somewhat sorry for myself because I was associating with other students who had had so many advantages that I had never had. They came from well to do families who could afford to give them what they wanted. Their futures were bright. My parents, although not poor, nevertheless lived on a very tight budget. Surely, I reasoned, if I couldn't make anything out of my life, it wasn't my fault, and I thought it unfair to be denied the things the others received from their parents.

Or we say that the breaks have come to others and that luck has passed by us. I think there can be no doubt that at times a man has an advantage because he is in the right place at the right time. But I have concluded with the passing of the years that this is never a legitimate reason for success and failure. The breaks of life tend to even up and if I lose one today, I may gain one tomorrow. The man who depends on luck may come to a sad end. Or we may say that some have influential friends. No doubt a man in a strong position can do something for a friend from time to time. But no man can be held up very long by his friends, for sooner or later he must produce and stand on his own two feet.

I suppose that if we can blame it on other people, we feel at ease because we are relieved of personal responsibility. Even in the church we find the same spirit of blaming everything that goes wrong on anything but ourselves. I grow weary of listening to alibis as to why we are not doing a better job and why we have failed to be a real influence in society. There can be no healing for us until we realize that so much of our ineffectiveness is within ourselves. The responsibility is our own. When church members fail to take seriously their commitment of time, talent, service, and money to their church - the church is bound to be ineffective.

Last Sunday we thought about the Parable of the Prodigal Son. You'll remember that when the young man had taken his inheritance and gone away into the far country, the time came when he was poor, hungry and defeated. One day he said to himself that he would rise and go to his father and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants". Now, no modern boy would have said that. He would have said that his trouble was his father's fault for being too strict, or his mother's fault for making him go to church when he was a boy. Or, if he sought a more scientific alibi, a psychologist might have told him he was the victim of a sibling rivalry. What a shocker it is to hear a boy stand up and say, "I'm to blame and the fault is mine"

Perhaps you've heard the story about the young minister with an attractive wife who liked new clothes. She spent too much money on the clothes and they were constantly in debt. Finally, they had a council and discussed the matter. She agreed not to buy anything without first talking it over with her husband. She went to town one day and came back with a new dress and the young minister said to her, "But dear... you promised me...." She replied, "I know I did, but the devil tempted me". He answered "You should have said to the devil, 'Get thee behind me, Satan". "Oh" she answered, "I did and he whispered, 'It fits so beautifully in the back'". There has to come a time when we will not blame it on Satan or on anyone else, but accept our personal responsibility for our own condition, our own situation. I think there is little hope of real growth for us until we do this.

PREFERENCE FOR SICKNESS

A third thing to consider and this is a rather shocking observation and that is that a good many people have a preference for sickness.

This man had been there by the pool, sick, for thirty-eight years, which is really making a career out of your weakness. It wasn't a bad life. His friends brought him there in the morning and came for him at night. The city had provided shade from the sun and protection from the rain. Here he met his cronies, and they talked together through the day. They watched other people going about their work and bearing their burdens which is always a pleasant recreation. After all those years, in all honesty he was not that anxious for a change. He may have had a preference for sickness.

We protest the evils we must endure, but actually we do not sincerely want them removed from us. The sickness of our society is war. Nobody wants war. We are unanimous in our hatred of war, and desire to be rid of it with strong conviction. But what about the things that go with war? What about the prosperity which grows out of our preparedness? What about all those industries that are tied up with defense projects? What about the business community and the profits that some receive in connection with military preparedness? What happens when the government wants to close down a naval base. If we hate war, we like many of the things that war is apt to give us. It would be a good thing for someone to ask us as Jesus asked that sick man: "Do you really want to be healed?"

Or what about lung cancer. Is there any person who wants lung cancer. What a foolish question. Ah, but we want something that the surgeon general has warned us may produce it. What a hard time we have had in getting a warning put inconspicuously on cigarettes. For this is a multi-million dollar business which means jobs and prosperity for many. The man caught in the habit will not break it, and while reading the warnings, he will hope that he is the exception. Somebody remarked recently that the new name for Forest Lawn Cemetery is Marlboro Country. How tragic it is that men and women will try to joke about a disease rather than be healed of it. Do we want to be healed?

There is always a certain amount of satisfaction in being relieved of responsibility. The invalid may develop a subtle psychology that takes delight in being free from the burdens other men have to bear. I want to be excused from carrying the heavy loads and doing the hard labor. As long as I am waiting to be healed, I have a perfect reason for being excused. If I am sick you may be sure that no one can criticize me for following an easier path. One of the most dangerous temptations people face is to embrace an ailment as a way to escape life. Do we really want to be healed? We need to be honest in answering it. Until we are, nobody can do very much for us.

THE HEALING Not all of the New Testament stories end happily, but this one did! When, at last, Jesus broke through the protective shell, through the defense mechanisms that the man had erected, through the pretense of the man's mind and helped him to see what he wanted, what he needed - he was healed.

Jesus said to him in effect that he must make an effort to stand up and stop feeling sorry for himself, to stand up and stop waiting for an angel, for someone to wave a magic wand over him. Often the hardest thing in life is making the start, taking that first step. How long we postpone the decision. How long we delay the action. We are going to break a habit, but not until tomorrow. We are going to start something new, but not until a more convenient time. We're going to join a church, but not just now - the next time, later on. We are going to lift ourselves up to a higher level, but not now. Tomorrow or next week - we'll get started on it. We have good intentions, but we're great in putting things off.

But then there are times when the miracle occurs and in ways beyond our understanding, our comprehension, He says to us: "Stand Up". Getting started is the hardest part. And if we can take Him at his word and simply believe that now is the moment then we are on our way to being healed, to being helped. A person takes the "leap of faith" and believes that Christ can give him what he needs and he accepts it and stands up.

Remember: according to our faith it shall be done unto us. According to our faith, we shall find the power, the strength and the healing. What a great thing it is to know that the Great Physician is just as available to each of us - here and now - just as He was to that man by the pool to whom He said, "Rise. Take up thy bed and walk".

LET US PRAY: We are conscious, O God, of our spiritual weakness. Help us to renew our spiritual energies, to take time apart from the world of busy activity, and ground us in the things that we really believe so that when we face a difficult situation, with thy help, we shall stand on our own feet and make our way steadily forward. In thy name we pray.