
Spiritual Formation Part 8

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Barriers to Following Christ Part 2

What Blocks us from Encountering Jesus Christ?

GOD AS OUR SAVIOR

John 3-5; 14-15 Barriers??

What God Desires

Verses

Others ↑ ← ← ME → → ↓ Self

Our Environment and Experiences

John 5:1-15

I have even seen many people turn their backs on real help. Instead of seeking help for a drinking problem, they stay drunk, destroying all of their relationships, career, hopes, and life. To continue to be sick is a powerful chain that holds us down. Sometimes, it is all we have and all we know, and we fear to venture into wellness. For the Christian, stuck in their faith, he or she has to want to grow in order to grow. The desire to draw near to God will bring down any barrier blocking us from that goal. We have to want to get well in order to do so. We have to want to be more mature and to have more character in order to be people of maturity and good character. Ask any doctor how important a desire to live and get well is for the patient's recovery, and most will say, assuredly, it is quintessentially important. When a patient gives up, he or she will usually get worse, and sometimes even die. The way of deliverance from suffering is blocked by the bricks the patient laid down himself because he or she did not want to be healed. Of course, sometimes, our willpower and desires cannot help us. Nonetheless, whether we are in a spiritual encounter, a medical surgery, or in therapy, the desire to get well or grow is powerfully important.

People who are weak in the faith or stagnate in their spiritual growth are that way, for the most part, because they do not want to receive divine help with their problems. They do not see God as the Equipper and Sustainer of their lives. They do not want to be helped out of their weakness; they either think they can do it on their own, or have given up. They love their weakness; their helplessness it is their comfort and identity. Perhaps it is the attention; perhaps it is from years of discouragement, and they are so beaten down they do not want to look up. They rarely, if ever, will seek the help of another. Perhaps it is anger or pride; whatever the case, they either tend to

crave the attention of others through their helplessness, or hide under the bed of discouragement. The result is stagnation and ignoring the One who can bring them comfort. I believe we can all be there at one time or another. I know I have been.

I believe this man's answer was just an excuse.

"Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."

He seemed to want to stay as he was while, at the same time, wanting out of his misery. He is saying that he wants to be healed, but also says he has tried but cannot. It seems he is determined to be hopeless. Have you felt that way? Have you, or have you known people who have given up hope, feeling that they have tried and, yet, see no way out? They see no way, from a human viewpoint, so they have resigned themselves to their barrier. Maybe you have tried to stop drinking but feel you cannot, or that you can control it. Maybe you do not see any hope for your marriage; maybe it is pornography, or pride. It is amazing to me how many people carelessly feel they are in control of something that really has control of them. You have heard of the person who says, "It's easy to stop smoking. I've done it hundreds of times!" Perhaps you have tried to correct things and have failed. You have asked for help but nobody seems to care; and, it only gets worse.

You cannot help someone who does not want to be helped. We have to realize that for us to go anywhere in life as a Christian, as our Lord moves among us, He will only ask this question of those who want to be healed. He may say nothing to those who do not or will not look to Him. It has been my experience and research that most Christians may not have reached the place this man had reached yet. They are not helpless enough yet. They are not ready to give up on human efforts to solve their problems. They have not realized their need or the plan that God has for them. They are not ready to admit they cannot make it on their own. They are still determined to get into the water by themselves when it is stirred, when they determine to do so, when it is their will regardless of God's will. Jesus usually works within the parameters of what we will allow, so when we put up barriers, although He could easily penetrate them, He chooses to do nothing for those who do not want His help (Psalm 139 1-24; Isaiah 40:29; Jeremiah 29:11; Matthew 7:7-11; 9:12-13; Mark 9:23-24; John 3:16-18; 14:1-3; Philippians 2:12-13).

What would you say to such a person; *hang in there, dude! Stay the course and you will prevail! I will pray for you. Hey, do you need a new mattress?* Jesus simply heals him. Not only does He heal the man, but He takes away his crutch and identity as a sick man. So, now he has no choice but to venture back into life and relationships. We may not be able to dramatically heal someone else or ourselves, but we can see what keeps us planted where we are. This man had a mat and an inability to walk. Jesus gives him the ability to walk, and takes away the mat so he does not regress. We can easily grow sometimes, but, then it does not take much for us to go back to our old ways. We have to get rid of the mat—the items and ideas that keep us stagnate. If it is

pornography, we have to get rid of the magazines and websites. If it is alcohol, we have to go dry, get rid of it all, and get help. If it is our spiritual growth, we have to ask ourselves what it is that holds us back—is it fear? Busyness? complacency? bad ideas of what faith is, and how to use it? bad role models? not in a small group or Bible study? Or, what?

Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

In those words, Jesus is saying something very important to those who need to be healed or helped; do not make any plan to go back to whatever you have done in the past that kept you oppressed and sick. Many people fail right there. We have to pour out the alcohol, get rid of the drugs, burn those magazines—and the most important thing, the surrender of our pride! Say, *no*, to the friends who have been luring you on into evil. You will probably find that some of them will come back with you. Cut off any possibility of going back. Let somebody know the new stand you have taken so that they will help hold you accountable. This is what Jesus is saying.

Jesus wants us to walk, that is, to grow in our faith with the goals of heartfelt worship and devotion that are contagious to others. He wants us to have a Christ-centered life, not a self-centered life. Jesus wants us to succeed in life, and we do this by desiring to grow His Way, removing the distractions, problems, and potential problems that become barriers that hold us back. If the sick man held onto his mat, he would have held onto his past identity and problems. The mat would have become the chain to pull him back—back to despair, back to hopelessness.

The *want* we are to have is determination. Determination is the ability to make difficult decisions and accomplish God's goals based on the truths of God's Word, regardless of the resistance that may be encountered. It is the ability to point ourselves toward Godly pursuits, and not allow ourselves to be distracted or discouraged (Psalms 33:15; 119:29-30; Galatians 5:19-21; 2 Timothy 4:7, 8; Hebrews 12:12-13). If we are not doing this, then we are in the realm of weakness, discouragement, powerlessness, and faintheartedness. These dire mindsets allow us to give up way too soon, when all we had to do was hang in a bit longer. Determination requires community; you have to have others to help you in accountability and learning; you cannot do it just on your own! These characteristics lead you to distrust God's provision and forbid others to help you. If you are not determined to exhibit character, the rotten *works* of Galatians 5:19-21 will find their way to you and even take you over!

Discovery Questions

Read John 5:1-15 and make some observations:

1. Why is it that we cannot help someone who does not want to be helped?

2. Have you come face to face with a barrier that holds you up? How do these ruts hold us back in our spiritual formation?
3. What does it take for you to spiritually walk well in Christ? What does your life look like when you do? What about when you do not?
4. Have you seen people turn their backs on real help, instead of seeking help for a problem such as drinking? How does this correspond to a spiritual problem?
5. How does to continue to be sick or slaking in our walk with Christ become a powerful chain that holds us down? How does this affect your work, school and social life?
6. Consider all that can holds you back in your faith development:
 - a. Is it fear?
 - b. Busyness?
 - c. Complacency?
 - d. Bad ideas of what faith is, and how to use it?
 - e. Bad role models?
 - f. Not in a small group or Bible study?
 - g. Or, what?
7. Have you, or have you known people who have given up hope, feeling that they have tried and, yet, see no way out? What can you do? What can you not do?
8. Has it ever seemed that your spiritual formation is hopeless? Have you felt that same way as this man in the passage? What did you do? If you face this now, what can you do? How can your church help?