

THE MALADY OF NOT WANTING

"Wilt thou be made whole?" John 5:6. "Do you want your health restored?" John 5:6 (Moffat).

This sermon is designed to help people who want spiritual health and power, but who, down deeper, do not want it. This, in all probability, was the condition of the man whom Christ Jesus was questioning in our text.

I. The Setting For This Malady.

There was in Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which in the Hebrew language was called "Bethesda", meaning "the house of mercy." When the waters of this pool bubbled up intermittently, they were reputed to contain elements of a medicinal and curative nature. It was peculiar to this pool that the flow of water came and went. Suddenly, it would bubble up, remain for a moment, and then die away. The impression was widespread that the healing virtues of the disturbed waters were applicable only to the one who succeeded in getting down into the pool first after the troubling of the water.

Around this pool five porches had been erected for the comfort of those who were waiting for a cure. Along these five porches lay a multitude of sick and afflicted people. All of them needed healing, but all of them were not equally sick. All of these people wanted to get rid of their maladies. Among them were many broken hearts as well as diseased bodies.

Among those who thronged the porches was a man who had been afflicted for thirty-eight years. That is a long time for one whose hands are busy with great and thrilling tasks, but, of course, it is much longer for one who is helpless. It was the claim of this man at the pool-side that somebody else was always getting ahead of him and cheating him out of the cure that might have been his if only he could have reached the water first, when the angel touched the pool. On the face of it that seemed to be an unlikely tale. This discouraged cripple rarely, if ever, made any really desperate attempts to get into the pool. The man had developed a kind of unconscious and morbid liking for the scant measure of security he had on one of the litters there at the pool-side. He may well have come to the point of getting a certain satisfaction out of the attention and sympathy he drew from others.

One Sabbath Christ visited Bethesda. It was always His custom to go to the places where people were in need and where hearts were breaking. He was there because of the misery and need, for He was the very incarnation of mercy. He was found where He was needed most, and where He could accomplish the most good; not in places of luxury, but in the haunts of misery. It was His purpose to alleviate the various diseases and sufferings of the people. He went to the place where the sick were in order to bless them.

The Great Physician walked among the sick and the afflicted unrecognized, unsought and unwelcomed. Passing through the crowd, He singled out this one man, went up to him, and proceeded to challenge him by asking him a pointed and specific question: "Wilt thou be made whole?"; or, as Moffatt has it, "Do you want your health restored?" In other words, Christ said, "Are you willing to be made whole?" "Do you really want to be well and strong?" If you do, the Master seems to say, if you really do want to get out of this place and shoulder the responsibilities of life, something wonderful can happen to you, and happen now. But you must make up your mind that you want this boon of health more than you want your self-pity, more than you want your discouragements and your fears, and more than you want the attention and solicitude of other people.

Christ knew that He did not have much chance of helping the man unless he faced the fact that he was sick and in need of a cure. The Lord's question made him face his actual condition, admit his desire, and make an open statement about his helplessness

and hopelessness. Willingness to be cured is essential to recovery. Christ does not choose to help people against their wills. He will not make a man whole against his will. For those who desire these things, Christ comes to them with pardon for sin, with peace for the restless cravings of the soul, with satisfaction for every hunger of the deepest being, and with comfort for sorrow.

There are far too many people who have a twofold sickness. They are suffering from two ailments at once. They may have a physical or a spiritual problem. In either case it is compound: there is the disability itself and there is the lack of a really deep and dominant desire to be well.

In that gripping tale called "The Master of Ballantrae," Robert Louis Stevenson has a conversation between the master and his servant, old Mackellar. It is a story of hatred, you will remember, and as this conversation proceeds the servant is packing the master's things so that the latter can start in determined pursuit of his brother, whom he will not forgive. As he watches the servant at work he asks him the question, "Do you think I never had a regret?" To this query the servant replied shrewdly, "I do not think you could be so bad a man if you had not all the machinery for being a good one." Then the master, with a touch of the cynical, answers, "Not at all, my evangelist. It is the malady of not wanting." He was candid enough to admit that he did not deeply want to be a good man.

"The malady of not wanting!" What a haunting phrase, and it needs to be set going like a warning gong in our thinking.

II. The Spheres Of This Malady.

1. The sphere of physical health.

This malady frequently appears in connection with physical illness. The doctors call it "malingering." A malingerer is the type of person who, in the popular phrase, "enjoys bad health." The ego is fed by having sympathy lavished upon it. The tendency in all such cases is to develop a neurotic condition.

A neurotic is one who is making a faulty adjustment to life. The process may go something like this: life becomes difficult in one way or another, so the mind, instead of adjusting to the difficulty in a healthy and courageous fashion, slips into a faulty adjustment. At the same time, so cunning is the mind, that it manages to block off from the consciousness the fact that a wrong or inferior adjustment is being made. The process may, indeed, reach the point where the mind becomes responsible for setting up certain symptoms of illness. By this trick a person appears to be relieved of the necessity of facing the unpleasantness of life's realities or of going through with its responsibilities. It is a clever piece of mental bookkeeping by which we try to "save face" with ourselves. Every student of personality problems has met it.

In one instance a mother who had one son began to rebel against the thought of ever seeing a sweetheart and wife step into the picture and share his love for her. This stupidly possessive attitude of some women should be called "smother love" rather than mother love. At any rate, when this son began to "date," that mother began to have headaches -- bad headaches, which sometimes forced her to go to bed. This usually happened far enough in advance of her son's engagements for him to telephone his girl friend and cancel the date. The result would be that that evening he held his mother's hand instead of the hand he had hoped to hold. When at length he became engaged to be married, the wedding, believe it or not, had to be postponed

three times on account of the illnesses of the mother — illness which had a curious way of clearing up as soon as the wedding was delayed. When finally the die was cast, the marriage performed, and the new relationship established, she got well.

Did she lie about her headaches? No. The symptoms were real enough, but the cause was emotional rather than physiological. She did not want to be well at such times. Nor is her case as rare as you might suppose. Amazing discoveries have been made in the researches of the last twenty-five years. Much of our physical and nervous distress is brought on by our own wrong attitudes, our own emotions that are allowed to run wild around the Maypole of our self-centeredness. We may think we want to be well, but we don't.

2. The sphere of personal achievement.

Many of our failures in life are due to the malady of not wanting. Many of our mediocre attainments in life are due to the malady of not wanting. If we could drift into high and great achievement without any great and driving purposes, the world would be a very different place. Our trouble is that we are easily satisfied. Because ambition is lacking, achievement is often missing.

I do not say that everyone who wants intensely to reach a certain level of success is able to achieve it. There are other factors that sometimes determine the final score. The fact remains, nevertheless, that the majority of failures to reach the higher levels may be accounted for, unhappily, by the malady of not wanting. The want-to never really caught fire.

3. The sphere of war and peace.

Ask the people of the world if they want war, and they will tell you no. Then why do we not have peace? At the risk of seeming to oversimplify the problem, I would answer by saying that, while we sentimentally do not want war, we go right on wanting the things that produce war. We want our prejudices and passions that help to breed war. We want our economic advantages no matter what disadvantages they may saddle on others, and that helps to bring on war. We want our sword-rattling power to be felt by little nations which are supposed to kowtow before the mighty, and that helps to set the stage for war.

Christ is saying to the leaders of our nations today what He said to the man at Bethesda's pool: "Do you really want to be well?" He knows that we don't — at least we don't with an all-out case of wanting. And that's the rub.

4. The sphere of spiritual possibilities.

Some of us are bound by degrading habits. Perhaps there is a thimblefull of desire to be rid of these bad habits, perhaps there are times when our habits get us into straits and, momentarily at least, we should like very much to be free from them, but this mood of repentance is so shallow and short-lived, and so, not really wanting to be set free, we go on in our chains.

Some of us are held back by a disposition that is always getting us into trouble. We seem to have been born in a bear-pit and were never able to get rid of our claws. How much do we really want to be changed? It is easy to let on that we very much want to be changed, but what are the honest and inside facts?

Some have taken a few steps toward becoming Christians. At least, they have indicated that they believed the gospel of Christ. They have said that the Christian way is the right way, and that the Christian experience of forgiveness and assured peace

with God is something they miss from their hearts. Yet, somehow, they are still strangers to the new life. They have never taken the leap into the arms of Christ. There may be several reasons for this condition, but surely one of them is that they are not keenly in earnest. They need to hear what Richard Cecil said, namely, "You will never yawn yourself into heaven with an idle wish."

III. The Steps To The Cure Of This Malady.

1. Be honest enough with yourself to admit that, while you have wanted God, you have wanted something else more.

Augustine has told us that long before his revolutionary conversion experience he offered numerous prayers for salvation without being any the better for them. He cried, "O Lord, save me from my sins," but added as in a parenthesis, "all save one." Nothing happened because he was not completely honest with himself or with God.

2. Be hard enough on yourself to bring to an end your emotional fatalism. That is the mood or pose which says, however unreasonably, "Whatever I do or whatever I am, I am not responsible for it; it is the way fate made me." It is a form of self-pity which we have got to recognize and repudiate. One of America's greatest preachers almost blasted his career forever by falling into this evil snare. He went through Harvard University with the expectation of becoming a school teacher. After graduation he was placed on the staff of the Boston Latin School. It is said that no young teacher ever failed more completely. The experience was so humiliating and frustrating that he went through months of indescribable agony and disheartenment. Particularly paralyzing to his hopes were the cruel words of the headmaster of the Latin School, who said, "I have never known a man who failed as a schoolmaster to succeed at anything else." That was a perfect setting for despair.

Yet that man rose from his temporary gloom and frustration to become one of Boston's leading citizens and one of America's most eloquent preachers -- Phillips Brooks. If you want a cure for the malady of not wanting, deny yourself the luxury of blaming fate for your present failure.

3. Be humble enough to take what Jesus Christ offers you.

That was the step which the disabled man at the Pool of Bethesda had to take. "Do you want your health restored?" was the searching, challenging question that the Lord put straight to him. Then He added, with all the grace and power of His Saviourhood, "Arise, take up thy bed, and walk."

Would the man take the gift of healing or not? For him it was the moment of crisis. His fears cried, "No, it's no use. You have tried too many times and failed. This will be just another useless attempt." Ah, these paralyzing fears of ours. Do you realize that it is possible for people to live with fear so long they are afraid to give up fear? His self-pity had a whining plea for delay: "After all, if you do get well maybe nobody will make over you. It's pretty risky, this business of going out to shoulder the responsibilities of life." His pride had a protest to offer also: "This is just too simple -- this Man coming up to you and making you the outright offer of health. He even passes by the effort you are supposed to make to get down into the pool. All He asks is that you believe His Word. That's much too easy."

And right there the poor fellow might have stuck -- precisely where many a man is stuck today. Right there he might have gone on being the flattened-out victim of the malady of not wanting.

That crippled man at the pool-side might have missed his health and freedom. So, also, many of us are missing ours. Do you really want new life in Christ? Then take it, for He is

offering it to you, and wants you to have it. Do you want deliverance from fear? That too can be yours, if you will have it. Do you want the sweetness of Christ's love overcoming your bitterness and bad temper? That also is yours for the taking.

Every man has the malady of sin, and no man can cure himself. No set of men can cure you. Christ alone can do that. He is accessible to all who hear His gospel message. He does not make any charges for His services. He has never failed with a single patient. But, He will never force a cure upon you. You must be willing for Him to cure you or to save you. All that now stands between you and a perfect cure for your soul is your own unwillingness. But to experience spiritual healing, you must come to Christ and trust Him entirely to cure and to save you. Christ is ready, willing and able to make you whole now. Are you ready and willing to be saved? Or, are you still the victim of the malady of not wanting to be saved? Let Christ forgive you, save you from your sins, give you a pure heart, good conscience and clean mind, make you whole, and bring you into God's family now.