

## The Second Sign: The Healing of the Official's Son, John 4:43-54

1. There are many similarities between the first and second signs: They are both in Cana, both on the "3<sup>rd</sup> day", in both cases Jesus initially responds negatively, and in both cases servants are among the few who know what Jesus has done. What are the differences between the two?
2. In this passage Jesus interacts with a "wealthy aristocrat, probably much influenced by Greco-Roman culture and not very religious by general Palestinian Jewish standards" (Keener, *BBC*). This follows Jesus' conversations with the highly religious Jewish Nicodemus and an ethnically marginalized Samaritan woman. In these conversations we learned that you have to be born from above, that Jesus was sent to save the world (Nicodemus) and that Jesus is the Messiah ushering in a new era (Samaritan woman). What new understanding does Jesus' encounter with the official add?
3. Despite the cheers when Jesus arrives from Samaria, we are reminded a prophet has no honor in his homeland (4:43-45; see also 2:23-24). Do you see this in this passage? Is this a positive example or a counter example?
4. This account presents a familiar pattern: We turn to Jesus, and step out in faith on his word. In doing so our trust is strengthened, much the way a child's trust is strengthened by repeatedly being called to trust in a parent. If the child's trust doesn't increase in time it is because (a) the child isn't asking anything of the parent; (b) isn't acting on the parent's words; or (c) isn't paying attention to the parent in the first place.  
  
Do you feel your trust in God is stronger than it was ten years ago? If so, what in your life helped build that trust? (If not, what might you ask of God which you have been reluctant to?)
5. A central message of the passage is that *why* we seek Jesus is important, and Jesus rebuffs those who come not for relationship, and not to follow him, but to get something from him or to put conditions on him in. This sort of "pragmatic" faith is similar to what sociologists Christian Smith calls "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (MTD). Read the excerpts with interviews with Smith (see other side). Have you observed MTD in young people?

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*Fun fact:* According to a Pew Forum survey, 79% affirm that "miracles still occur today as in ancient times," and 34% of Americans claim to have witnessed or experienced divine healing. Not surprisingly, the corresponding number is higher for those in the Global South. [Keener, *Miracles*, vol. 1, p. 203]

## Teenagers, Emerging Adults, and Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

In "What American Teenagers Believe"<sup>1</sup>, sociologist Christian Smith of UNC Chapel Hill described his findings that teenagers are not, as feared, "disillusioned, irreverent, uniquely postmodern", nor are they primarily "spiritual but not religious". His findings show that "most of them are conventional in their beliefs", but that

what legitimates the religion of most youth today is not that it is the life transformative, transcendent truth, but that it instrumentally provides mental, psychological, emotional, and social benefits that teens find useful and valuable...

Based on our findings, I suggest that the *de facto* religious faith of the majority of American teens is "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." God exists. God created the world. God set up some kind of moral structure. God wants me to be nice. He wants me to be pleasant, wants me to get along with people. That's teen morality. The purpose of life is to be happy and feel good, and good people go to heaven. And nearly everyone's good.

In a more recent interview<sup>2</sup>, Smith describes his research on the cohort entering adulthood (ages 18-29):

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is still the *de facto* practiced religious faith, but it becomes a little more complicated for emerging adults. They have more life experience, so some of them are starting to ask, "Does MTD really work? Isn't life more complicated than this?" MTD is easier to believe and practice when you are in high school.

There is also a much larger segment of emerging adults than of teenagers that is outrightly hostile to religion. Some who previously were MTDS have become anti-religious. That said, the center of gravity among emerging adults is definitely MTD. Most emerging adults view religion as training in becoming a good person. And they think they are basically good people. To not be a good person, you have to be a horrible person. Therefore, everything's fine.

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<sup>1</sup> *Books & Culture*, Jan/Feb 2005.

<sup>2</sup> "Lost in Transition", *Christianity Today*, Oct 9 2009.

## Extra questions:

1. Why did Jesus respond the way he did? Was Jesus without compassion?
2. John is showing us this man as an example; what do we take from the example?
3. What does this account tell us about Jesus?
  - a. First, Jesus' mastery over life and health, even healing at a distance with a word
  - b. Second, the type of faith Jesus desires
4. What is the emotional state, and attitude, of the official as he approaches Jesus, leaves Jesus, and meets his servants? What is he seeking and what does he find? What is the emotional center of this story, and how do Jesus' emotions interact with the father's?

### Leader's Intro:

To quote Carson, "The one who transformed water into wine, eclipsing the old rites of purification and announcing the dawning joy of the messianic banquet, is the one who continues his messianic work, whether he is rightly trusted or not, by bringing healing and snatching life back from the brink of death (cf. Is 35:5-6; 53:4a [cf. Mt 8:16-17]; 61:1).

This sign tells us of Jesus' mastery over life and health and his compassion. And it shows us belief in a representative of a new group: non-religious Jews. It also tells us of the sort of faith Jesus desires, which is a faith that seeks him without conditions. Some see miracles and turn against Jesus (as some did after Lazarus); some see and believe (the Samaritan woman); this official comes to Jesus seeking help, but not seeking the Messiah, but the sign brings about belief in him. Jesus is frustrated that his own people aren't seeking him, but his compassion leads him to heal the son.

It's a short passage, and too much shouldn't be squeezed out of it. But the underlying message that seeking Jesus isn't enough, you have to seek him for the right reasons is important. We can fall into this if we aren't careful; are we seeking God's protection, healing, blessing, etc., or are we seeking to know him better? And we can watch for this in those we reach out to. Are they about the light show or about Jesus himself? And in our children we shouldn't be satisfied that they believe, if the reason they believe is because of what they can get from God. We should help them go deeper.

Exegetically this forms the second book-end of an *inclusio*, and so it's worth contrasting it with the other encounters: W@C, Nicodemus, Samaritan Woman.

## Notes

### I. Background

- a. We are jumping ahead from the first sign to the second (note none of the rest of the seven are explicitly numbered), passing by this material:
  - i. The Samaritan woman
    1. Which told us Jesus is
      - a. The Messiah (4:25-26)
      - b. The one who has been sent by his Father to reap a crop for eternal life (4:34,36)
      - c. The savior of the world (42)
  - b. The term for “royal official” (*basilikos*):
    - i. Carson: Sometimes rendered ‘nobleman’, is an official attached to the service of the king, which would here mean Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee from 4 BC to 39 AD (and not an actual king, though he was popularly considered one—Mk 6:14). There is no evidence this is a Gentile.
    - ii. BBC: “this man who comes to Jesus would be a wealthy aristocrat, probably much influenced by Greco-Roman culture and not very religious by general Palestinian Jewish standards.”
  - c. Long distance miracles were rare by OT standards, as well as other Jewish and Greco-Roman standards.

### II. Words and Phrases

- i. Belief (48, 50, 53)
  1. The English “believe” and “belief” occur 86 times in John
  2. People believe because:
    - a. Jesus saw Nathaniel under the fig tree
    - b. W@C
    - c. Jesus’ teaching an Scripture (the disciples, after the resurrection; 2:22)
    - d. Signs (2:23)
    - e. Jesus’ supernatural knowledge (Samaritan woman) and her testimony
    - f. Healing of official’s son
    - g. Disciples, after feeding of 5k, because Jesus has the “words of eternal life”
    - h. Healing of man born blind
    - i. Because they recognize his voice (10)
    - j. Because of Lazarus’ raising (11)
    - k. Because of the resurrection (13:19; 14:29)
    - l. Jesus’ teaching: “Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God” (16:30)
    - m. Through the disciples’ message (high priestly prayer, 17:20; 19:35)
    - n. Seeing the empty tomb (20:8) and the stigmata (20:25; though blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe, 20:29)
  3. Those who fail to believe:
    - a. Jews who didn’t believe Moses’ words and so don’t believe Jesus
    - b. Even his own bros (7:5)
    - c. “But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.” (8:45—Jews misled by the Devil)
    - d. Because they are not his sheep (10:26)
    - e. Their eyes have been blinded as foretold by Isaiah (12:37-43)

4. Conclusion: The highest good is belief in Jesus for what he says, but the signs are there for a reason, and God wants them to build our faith

### III. Themes

- a. True faith v. pseudo faith
  - i. Gary and Dennis: it is a false faith which demands to be satisfied
  - ii. Do we make demands of Jesus prior to our being willing to trust him?
  - iii. How do we help move forward those who are stuck with a false faith that makes insatiable demands?
- b. The pattern of petitioning Jesus -> Jesus' word being given to us -> we step out on that word -> our trust is rewarded -> our faith grows
  - i. Jesus wants us to learn to trust him more and more; if our trust isn't growing in time then we are either not asking or not stepping out
- c. The lack of belief on the part of the Jews, contrasted with that of the Samaritans
- d. What role do miracles play in our faith and belief?
  - i. Jesus refuses to work miracles when asked for signs: "The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. 12 And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation." 13 And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side."(Mk 8:11-13, Mt 12:38-42)
  - ii. "Just as parables both concealed and revealed, Jesus' miracles, especially those over powers of the natural world, not only triggered misunderstanding but also revealed the in-breaking of the power of God's reign" (Blomberg)
  - iii. John's clear about the purpose of the signs: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (Jn 20:30-31)
  - iv. But Jesus also says belief without seeing a miracle is "blessed": "Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."" (Jn 20:24-29)
  - v. We know from the response to Lazarus' healing that miracles can't compel truth faith (11:45-46)
  - vi. The miracles, which are a sign of the kingdom (Is 35:5-6; 53:4a [cf. Mt 8:16-17]; 61:1) were meant to point to Jesus as the Messiah (Jn 20:30-31), and often spur people to belief, as in this account. Others, though, demand a sign as a test of Jesus, and are not open to actual belief (Jn 2:23-24; 4:48; Mk 8:11-13, Mt 12:38-42). Miracles can build faith if they don't become the goal in themselves.

### IV. Observations

- a. Dennis: we are told the man "believed" when Jesus told him his son was healed, and this is confirmed by his turning back—but then he still inquires of the servants he meets on the road as to the time of the recovery
- b. Gary: The pathos is greatest when the man is heading back
- c.

### V. Questions

- a. Anthony's question about a therapeutic God

### VI. To do

- a. ...