

The last few years have witnessed an incredible rise in a specific genre of audio entertainment known as true crime podcasts. If you opened Spotify right now, you would find more than 100 to choose from. True crime podcasts are more popular than sports, education, business, health, religion, and spirituality. People have a fascination with these stories about a crime that was committed and the suspenseful journey of figuring out who did it and why. Our passage today in John 5 reads a bit like a true crime podcast. If you have your Bible, turn with me there. What we are going to see as we dive into this passage is that Jesus is accused of a “crime” and the leaders in authority bring him in for an interrogation, trying to get to the bottom of it. Jesus not only gives them answers, but points them to alibis, to corroborating witnesses who will validate and confirm his testimony. The audience is ultimately us—we get to decide who Jesus is and what all the evidence means and work toward a verdict.

Let’s begin by looking at **The Crime (John 5:1-10)**. Jesus was accused of breaking one of the most sacred commands of ancient Jewish society, and it all begins in John 5:1. “Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades.” Jesus is back in Israel’s capital to celebrate one of the feasts. He is near a place called the “Sheep Gate,” which, you may be able to guess, got its name because that is the gate sheep were taken through on their way to be sacrificed in the temple. Stop and think for a second about the beautiful image John is painting for us with this simple detail which he could have easily omitted. Throughout history, there had literally been millions of lambs led through that gate—Josephus says that just on Passover he witnessed 265,000 lambs sacrificed. That was one feast during one year! The lambs were on their way to shed their blood so that people could be forgiven. And here we have Jesus, the one who is called “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,” standing near the Sheep Gate. He’s near a pool which is called Bethesda, or “house of mercy,” which is fitting, because Jesus is preparing to pour out mercy on a man who was in desperate need. “Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed” (John 5:3). Try to imagine, if you can, what visiting a hospital in a developing nation might be like—a lack of sanitation, sometimes two people who aren’t related to one another sharing the same bed, patients with sores, a general sense of hopelessness and despair. That’s what’s happening here. Ancient sources tell us that hundreds of infirm people congregated in this exact spot, somewhat equivalent to a homeless camp today.

“One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, ‘Do you want to get well?’” (John 5:5-6). At first this seems like a very unusual question (“Do you want to get well?”), but it was an essential question, because some people are not well and they are perfectly content with their situation. I read a study this week that followed a man on the street who held a sign asking for help. He made, on average, over \$300 a day. When asked if he would like to get an actual job, he said no. He preferred holding his sign and taking other people’s money. He didn’t want to get well. There may be aspects like that in our own lives. We may think and we may say we want God’s healing touch and to be restored, but when it comes down to it, we aren’t willing to do what’s required to actually get well. You say you want God’s blessing on a new romantic relationship, but you are dating a non-Christian, which the Scriptures say you should never do. You say you want God’s blessing on your finances, but you aren’t honoring him with a tithe. You say you want to be physically healthy, but you aren’t willing to eat better and work out. I was talking with a pastor from a different state this week who told me about a multi-generational family in his church—grandparents, parents, and grandkids. Recently the family sat down with the grandfather and confronted him on his drinking problem. They said if he couldn’t stop drinking, he wouldn’t be able to see the grandkids. Once everyone left, the man said, “I don’t know what to do.” The pastor said, “What do you mean you don’t know what to do? It’s either alcohol or your grandkids—and you can’t decide?”

The man had no real desire to get well. Perhaps there may be a similar dynamic at work in certain places of our lives—there’s an area that is broken and in disarray, and we are forced to ask ourselves if we really *actually* want to get well.

This guy gives Jesus an off- topic response about not being able to get into the water at the right time, which was based on a superstition. Jesus dismisses that pointless logic and says, “‘Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.’ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked” (John 5:8-9a). He is healed. He is made well. A man who had been unable to walk for 38 years is cured all at once. Can you imagine what it would have been like for him, feeling the power and mercy of God flowing through his emaciated body? A friend of mine who was in good shape broke his arm last year. It was in a cast for a few months. When he got his cast off, he found his muscles had shrunk. He had a Popeye arm and a toothpick. Just a few months of non-use resulted in remarkable atrophy. The man in our story hadn’t used his legs in four decades. He would have been able to visibly watch his muscles grow and feel God’s grace pulsating through his body! What a merciful miracle, performed by Jesus at the house of mercy.

Now we get the lynchpin detail that pushes this from an act of kindness into a potential crime: “The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, ‘It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat’” (John 5:9b-10). This seems like an unbelievable comment, doesn’t it? A man gets miraculously healed and that’s their response? A man they had walked by nearly every day of their lives, who had been lying there, desperate and helpless, is now walking and carrying his mat, and all they have to say is, “It’s the Sabbath, you’re not supposed to be carrying your mat”? Imagine you are a police officer and one of your jobs is to make sure people follow the law. Let’s say you get a call that an incident has taken place at my house, so you hop in your squad car and head over. When you pull up, you look around and see that I’m flying high in the air—no jet suit, no wind-assisted parasailing. It’s me, a man you’ve known for years, and with your own eyes you see me flying. I finally come down, and when you come up to me, the first thing you do is hand me a ticket and say, “You violated FAA policy by flying without a permit.” The fact that I broke the laws of physics should supersede the concern that I may have broken the laws of the FAA. That’s what’s going on with Jesus. And just to be clear, Jesus never broke an actual law from the Bible. The Scriptures never commanded people not to heal on the Sabbath or not to carry a mat on the Sabbath. The Old Testament says that the Sabbath is to be kept holy and people are not supposed to do work. It was the Jewish leaders who imposed 39 regulations defining what they considered work that was not supposed to be done. Then they attributed to their interpretations and opinions the same authority as Scripture. This is something we must be careful not to do in our lives, in our own context. They entirely look past the miracle and dig in their heels on the fact that Chick-fil-A isn’t supposed to be open on Sunday. So that’s **The Crime: Jesus healed on the Sabbath.**

Once the leaders gather up the facts, it’s time for **The Interrogation (John 5:16-23)**. They want to go after Jesus, get to the bottom of this, shake him down and shut him down, because they view him as a threat to the entire system that they rely upon for social standing and wealth accumulation. He has an enormous target on his chest. “So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him” (John 5:16). They are outraged that Jesus is not demonstrating his power and doing his work in ways consistent with their expectations and traditions, so they persecute him, they dig their heels in with a stance of opposition and hostility. “In his defense Jesus said to them, ‘My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working’” (John 5:17). It’s hard to put into words how explosive this statement was, and how offensive to Jewish sensibilities Jesus’ claim is. This was like bringing pulled pork to a bar mitzvah! Jesus said, “My father is always at work to this very day.” The Bible says, “He who watches over Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers” (Psalm 121:4). The Jews believed God was the only one who could work on the Sabbath because he had to keep the world in motion. Jesus says, “You know that God never stops working. Just like he shows up on the Sabbath, so do I.” This

infuriated the leaders! “For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18). This is the heart of the issue: Jesus was making himself equal to God. Jesus said, “You shouldn’t be upset. We all know God is allowed to work on the Sabbath—that’s why I’m working on the Sabbath, because I am God! Here I am, in the flesh!” In the next few verses, Jesus spells out exactly what that means. He substantiates his divinity by making four specific claims:

1. *Jesus is equal with God in performance*: “Whatever the Father does the Son also does” (John 5:19).
2. *Jesus is equal with God in power to raise the dead*: “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it” (John 5:21).
3. *Jesus is equal with God in proclamation of Judgement*: “The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgement to the Son” (John 5:22).
4. *Jesus is equal with God in praise* (he will be honored, just like the Father!): “All may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him” (John 5:23).

So what did **The Interrogation** reveal? **Jesus claims to be God in the flesh**. He is equal to God! He has all the authority, all the power, all the prerogatives of God, and should be worshiped, honored, and believed upon, just like God the Father. Now clearly, if you or I claimed something like this, if we claimed to be God, if our boss claimed to be God, if our spouse claimed to be God, we would say that’s insane. Whoever makes such an assertion has lost their marbles. A few weeks ago, I recommended people read CS Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*. In that book, Lewis looks at Jesus’ claim to be God and says there are only three options: he was lying (trying to deceive people); he was a lunatic (he lost it mentally); or it’s true that he’s Lord. Those are the only three options. If you know he called himself God and he’s not God, you can’t call him a wise teacher, you can’t call him a good moral example. It’s either all or nothing. He’s either deceptive, delusional, or divine—there is no other option.

Jesus, knowing that people weren’t going to take his word for it says, “It’s time to evaluate all the evidence, time to speak to **The Witnesses (John 5:31-40)**.” “If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true” (John 5:31). This doesn’t mean that his testimony is not factually accurate. Jesus simply means that in a Jewish court of law, a person’s own testimony wasn’t considered sufficient evidence. Everything had to be corroborated by two or three additional sources. Jesus points them to four sources.

### **Witness #1: John the Baptist**

“You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light” (John 5:33-35). Jesus is saying they should listen to John the Baptist. John was the most well-known, the most popular prophet that Israel had seen in hundreds of years. Even though John was confrontational and called them to repent, lots of people listened to him. When John the Baptist spoke of Jesus he said, “Behold, this is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” “I am not even worthy to kneel down and untie his sandals.” “He must increase, I must decrease.” Jesus is saying you should listen to John. But there is a second witness.

### **Witness #2: The Miracles**

“I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me” (John 5:36). In other words, “You may find it hard to believe that I have come down from heaven. That sort of message might hit you as

offensive or unpalatable, but look at the evidence: the blind see, the lepers are healed, the dead are raised, the masses are miraculously fed with just a few loaves, this man who was lame for 38 years started walking again.” These weren’t illusions. These weren’t stunts or party tricks. These were bona fide miracles that point to Jesus’ divinity.

### **Witness #3: God the Father**

““The Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me”” (John 5:37). Most scholars believe this is a reference to Jesus’ baptism. When Jesus came out of the water, God the Father spoke and said, “This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.” The Father has affirmed Jesus’ identity, so people should listen to him.

### **Witness #4: The Scriptures**

““You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life”” (John 5:39-40). The entire Old Testament is pointing to Jesus. A few days ago, a picture of the Mississippi River and all its tributaries came across my feed. Every one of these rivers and streams ultimately finds its ending point and reaches its culmination by joining up with this one river. That’s what the Scriptures are like: they all point to Jesus. But these leaders refused to see it! Two years ago, Pope Francis was preaching on Romans and said, “The Old Testament Scriptures do not give life. They are not capable of fulfilling that promise. Those who seek life need to look to Christ.” When he said that, just like when Jesus said it 2,000 years ago, the Jewish leaders got upset. On behalf of the Supreme Rabbinic Authority in Israel, Rabbi Arousi sent this letter to the Vatican: "In his homily, the pope presents the Christian faith as not just superseding the Torah; but asserts that the latter no longer gives life, implying that Jewish religious practice in the present era is rendered obsolete.” That’s the point. Christ is the fulfillment of the law, and when Christ comes, he literally makes the scaffolding that came before him obsolete. It offended people back then; it offends people today. There are people who study the Scriptures extensively. They read it with a fine-toothed comb. They know the Word of God, but they don’t know the God of the Word. So here he was, standing in front of them, and they couldn’t see it. The question is not whether or not he is offensive, or politically correct, but whether or not this is true!

All **The Witnesses** (John the Baptist, the miracles, God the Father, the Scriptures) affirm Jesus’ testimony, and they declare with conviction, **Jesus really is God in the flesh**. That’s where all the evidence is pointing. But just like in a courtroom, and just like in a true crime episode, the last piece is the most essential, the most crucial element: **The Verdict**. Having looked at all the evidence, a decision has to be made about Jesus. And we’re the jury. When you look at Jesus, who do you say he is? This is the single most important decision anyone will ever make—not who they are going to marry, not their college, their career, or kids, or the city where they’ll live. This decision, the decision about the identity of Jesus, and if he really is God in the flesh, is the most important one you will ever make. This is the point of the entire passage. This is not a chapter that tells you seven steps to become a better leader, five steps to have a better marriage, three steps to improve your finances. There are no commands to evangelize, read your Bible, pray, or take care of the poor. This entire chapter is about one thing and one thing alone: people being confronted with the identity of Jesus, and being forced to come to a conclusion about who he is and what it means for their lives.

We are in a similar situation as the Jewish leaders today because we, too, have to come to a decision about the identity of Jesus and what it means for our lives! Jesus brushed aside their expectations and preferences, offended their sensibilities, and insisted they accept him on his terms; the same is true for us. Jesus doesn’t come to validate our already held beliefs, coddle us, and validate us in our sinful, selfish

lifestyle—that's not how the God of the universe works. We have to decide who he is, and once we decide who he is, we have to decide if we are going to pay the price to follow him.

There was a time in Jesus' ministry where he pressed his followers to make a decision about his identity.

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "God's Messiah." (Luke 9:18-20)

Jesus shared all the popular answers, then he made it personal: "Who do you say I am? It's not enough to know what other people think, what about you, what do you think?" Peter said, "We've looked at all the evidence and you are God's Messiah." This is the conviction that Jesus wants every one of us to have: Jesus is the Messiah, God in the flesh, the one who has come to teach us, deliver, call us by name and save us.

What does it mean for us to declare Jesus is the Messiah? It means we follow him! Jesus went on to tell them that as the Messiah, he was going to be betrayed, arrested, and nailed to a cross. Then he said, "And just like I am going to lay down my life, as my disciples, you are going to have to lay down your lives, too."

Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? (Luke 9:23-25)