



*To Know Christ . . .  
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina  
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## **God at Work John 5:16-23**

You've seen them, I'm sure, as you travel the streets and highways—signs along the roadside that say “Work Zone.” In an earlier day, they often read, “Men at Work.”

When you see a sign like that, you know to slow down and be careful. Sometimes, if the sign isn't there, you might not even know people are working there.

Sometimes I think that we Christians almost need signs posted along our journey that say, “God at Work.”

Far too often, we miss what He's doing around us. Maybe it's because He's working in ways different from what we're expecting. Maybe we simply aren't watching for what He's doing. Either way, when we fail to see God at work, we miss out on blessings and opportunities.

### ***Experiencing God***

Recently we've been thinking together about the themes of Henry Blackaby and Claude King's *Experiencing God* study.<sup>1</sup> We've talked about knowing God and the vital connection between knowing God's nature and doing God's will. Today we begin looking at what Blackaby describes as the “Seven Realities of Experiencing God.”<sup>2</sup> Here's how Blackaby states them:

- *God is always at work around you.*
- *God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.*
- *God invites you to become involved with Him in His work.*
- *God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways.*
- *God's invitation to work with Him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.*
- *You must make major adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing.*
- *You come to know God by experience as you obey Him and He accomplishes His work through you.*

We're going to look at these one by one over the coming weeks. Most of them will overlap the others to some degree. This morning we start with the first reality of experiencing God: *God is always at work around us.*

Our best model for understanding this truth and what it means for us is Jesus Himself. He always did His Father's will. He always knew how the Father was working and what He was doing, and how He Himself, as God the Son, was to be a part of the Father's work.

In our text, John 5:16-23, *Jesus described how the Father is always at work, and what that meant for His work.* Listen to how He described it. *Read text . . .*

### ***How Jesus operated***

It's always important to consider the context when you're studying a passage of Scripture. Jesus had just healed a man at the pool of Bethesda who had been an invalid for 38 years. There was a belief that an angel came down from time to time and stirred the waters in the pool. When that happened, whoever got into the water first would be healed of whatever sickness or infirmity they had. So many disabled people would gather there—folks who were blind, lame, or paralyzed. Since the man couldn't walk and he didn't have anyone to help him when the water stirred, someone else would make it to the water before he could drag himself in.

So Jesus told the man to get up, take up his mat and walk. And he did, completely cured!

Now you'd think that everyone would be overjoyed and amazed at this. But not everybody was. You see, Jesus did this on the Sabbath, so the Jewish leaders were upset with Him. They accused Him of breaking the Sabbath by healing on it, and of causing the man who was healed to break it by carrying his mat!

So these Jewish leaders began to try to persecute Jesus. Our text tells us how Jesus responded to them.

He responded something like this, describing how He went about His work (5:17, 19-23):

- **"My Father is always at his work to this very day,**
- **and I, too, am working."**
- **"I do nothing on my own initiative"—in other words, "the Son can do nothing by himself."**
- **"I watch to see what the Father is doing"—because the Son "can do only what he sees the Father doing."**
- **"I do what I see the Father is already doing"—so that "whatever the Father does the Son also does."**
- **"The Father loves the Son"**
- **and shows the Son everything that He is doing.**

When you look at how what Jesus says here is structured from the perspective of ancient literary methods, the central point is that since Jesus the Son can only do what He sees the Father doing, He watches carefully to see what He is doing. So the Father works through the Son, to accomplish His redemptive work.

Now if Jesus, God the Son in human flesh, truly human and truly God, took this approach, shouldn't *we*?

But how do we usually do it? Don't we usually look for *something to do for God*, rather than looking to see *what God is doing*, and joining Him in that so that He works *through us* to accomplish *His* will and purpose?

### ***A case in point***

Henry Blackaby tells in his book about his church's experience in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in Canada when they were trying to start a student ministry at the nearby university. "Experts" advised them to start Bible studies in the dorms, but after two years, they saw little success.

So one Sunday, Blackaby pulled together the college students in his church. He says that God had impressed two Scriptures on his heart that week. The first one was from Romans 3:10-11 (NKJV):<sup>3</sup> **There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after**

God. The second was from John 6:44 (NKJV): “No one can come to Me [Jesus] unless the Father who sent Me draws him.” Based on these passages, Blackaby asked the students to watch that week for where God was working, and to drop whatever they doing to join Him.

By Wednesday, a female student came back telling how another student had talked to her and said, “I think you’re a Christian, and I need your help. Eleven of us girls in the dorm have been studying the Bible, but none of us are Christians. Could you help us find someone to lead us in a Bible study?”

Before long, there were three Bible study groups in the women’s dorms and two in the men’s. Many of the participants became Christians, and a number of those became ministers or missionaries!<sup>4</sup>

### ***Grasping reality***

We need to grasp this reality: *God is always at work around us.* Many times we don’t realize it, because we’re *not sensitive to it* or we’re not watching for it. But He is!

We need to remember three important truths about God’s being at work around us, and order our lives and our life together by them.

First, *God is always at work!*

Sometimes He works through supernatural means, like His mighty signs and wonders through Moses, Elijah, Jesus, and the Apostles, and even later on in the early church and in the church in some parts of the world today. More often He works in and through the mundane, everyday events and circumstances of our lives.

So how can we recognize how and where God is working? We need to look for things like

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- When we’re presented with opportunities that only God could provide.
- When we see events only God could orchestrate.
- When we see circumstances or events converge in ways that are clearly providential rather than just circumstantial.
- When we witness accomplishments that only God could bring about.
- When we see someone seeking after God or asking spiritual questions—People *will not* seek God on their own. When they do, the Father is drawing them through His Spirit! That’s God at work!

Here’s the second truth: *God involves us, His people, in His work as individuals and as a church.*

In His wisdom and purpose, God has chosen to accomplish His purpose through human beings. He primarily uses those who are His people, though He may use those who aren’t, just as He used Cyrus, the Persian emperor, in Judah’s restoration after the exile in Babylon.

When God called Moses at the burning bush, He told Moses, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt . . . I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them . . . So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:7-10).

God still works that way. He calls us to be on mission with Him, and He accomplishes His purpose through us!

And here’s the third thing: *God equips every believer to do what He calls us to do,* as we function as a part of the body of Christ expressed in a local church.

He may call us to do something we've never done before. If He does, He equips us for the task through His Spirit. This power of Christ operating through the Spirit in us is what spiritual gifts are all about. Charles Talbert describes them as the power of the risen Christ operating in us. If God calls us to join Him in something we've never done before, we can trust Him to give us whatever gifts we need to do it. That shows that it's *His* doing!

### ***Caution: God at Work***

Just as Jesus declared that day, *God is always at work around us*. Watching for His work truly revolutionizes the way we live our lives and carry out our ministry as followers of Jesus and as the body of Christ.

In a church I previously served as pastor, we did the same type of *Experiencing God* emphasis we're doing.

In the midst of that, one Sunday morning a Latino seasonal farm worker came into the sanctuary during Sunday School. He was very clearly distressed. Someone who could understand a little Spanish figured out that his fellow workers had left to go back to Mexico. He was alone and hungry. A deacon took him to get something to eat and to keep him company for a little while.

That evening we had a deacons' meeting. As we reflected on what had happened that morning, I felt compelled to say it: "You know, in light of what we've been talking about in our *Experiencing God* emphasis, it seems to me that God's invitation to join Him in ministering to Hispanics walked through our front door this morning!" Someone moved to form a committee to look into the need and how to establish such a ministry.

As the study was being conducted, Maude, one of our members who was a public school teacher, came up to me one Sunday and said, "I have enough time in; I'm retiring at the end of the month, and I want you to put me to work with something here at the church."

Maude lovingly coordinated the church's ministry to seasonal farm workers for many years!

But God did something even more amazing in the midst of all that. A Palestinian Muslim family ran a convenience store near the church. The wife had lived in her youth in South America and was fluent in Spanish as well as Arabic. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the church rented its empty parsonage to this family so they could be closer to the store as a matter of security, since a few folks in town made unfounded assumptions about this family, and even some threats.

When the wife found out about this ministry, she and the children started attending the supper and fellowship time almost every Saturday night, craving interaction with other internationals.

On top of that, the two children from a Chinese family that ran a restaurant in town came. They started attending Sunday School and Worship, and I later had the opportunity to baptize both of them!

Friends, only God could bring all that together! And He's at work around us here in Wilmington and in our surrounding communities!

Are you watching for Him?

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<sup>1</sup> In this sermon series, I am relying heavily on concepts presented in Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Blackaby and King, 32.

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® (1984 edition).

<sup>4</sup> Blackaby and King, 44-45.