

Homiletics Analysis: John 5

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

John 5 unfolds in two distinct but inseparable movements. The first (vv. 1–18) is a healing narrative: Jesus encounters a man at the Pool of Bethesda who has been paralyzed for thirty-eight years, heals him on the Sabbath with a word, and the resulting confrontation with Jewish leaders escalates immediately from a Sabbath dispute to a charge of blasphemy when Jesus claims God as His own Father. The second and dominant movement (vv. 19–47) is Jesus' extended self-testimony — the most sustained, concentrated claim to divine identity and authority in the Gospel to this point. Jesus speaks of His relationship to the Father in terms of ontological equality and functional unity: He does only what He sees the Father doing; the Father has given Him authority to give life and to judge; the Son is to be honored equally with the Father; those who hear His word and believe the Father who sent Him have already passed from death to life. The chapter closes with Jesus summoning witnesses to His identity — John the Baptist, His own works, the Father's testimony, and Moses himself — and indicting His opponents for their studied refusal to come to Him for life despite searching the Scriptures that testify of Him.

This Text — Intent

God is pressing through this chapter a confrontation that cannot be safely neutralized. The healing is not merely a compassion story — it is a controlled provocation that forces a question about authority. And the discourse that follows is not theological instruction for the curious — it is a courtroom summons. Jesus is presenting His credentials. Every witness is called. Every claim is substantiated. The intent is to bring readers (and the original hearers) to a moment of unavoidable verdict: this man is either who He says He is, or He is the most dangerous blasphemer in Israel's history. There is no third category. The chapter's intent is to strip away the comfortable middle position, confront the reader with the total claim Jesus makes on their understanding of God and of themselves, and call for a response that is not academic but existential — coming to Him for life, or refusing and remaining in judgment.

Subject Sentence: The Son of God presents His full credentials and demands a verdict.

Primary Claim: Jesus does not merely ask for belief — He summons every available witness, indicts every form of evasion, and presents Himself as the sole source of life and the appointed judge of all, demanding that the reader decide who He actually is.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature of the Healing and the Sabbath Controversy (vv. 1–18)

Some interpretive traditions, particularly those with a therapeutic or social-gospel emphasis, read the healing at Bethesda primarily as a model of compassionate ministry to the marginalized — the man is poor, alone, lacking community support, and Jesus reaches him precisely there. This reading has pastoral warmth but fails as an account of what the passage is doing literarily. John does not linger on the man's social condition or on Jesus' compassion as the focal point. The healing is narrated with striking brevity and no emotional elaboration. What John emphasizes is the timing (Sabbath), the immediate confrontation it produces, and Jesus' response to the charge — not the compassion itself. The compassion is real, but the healing functions as a Christological provocation, not a ministry template. To reduce it to the latter is to miss why the passage exists in John's Gospel.

A more serious hermeneutical issue concerns Jesus' statement in verse 17: "*My Father is working until now, and I am working.*" Jewish interpreters of the period held that God's Sabbath rest did not mean cessation of providential activity — God continued to give life and judge even on the Sabbath. Jesus is claiming to do exactly those things — give life and judge (vv. 21–22) — as the Son who acts in identity with the Father. The charge of blasphemy in verse 18 is not a misunderstanding on the opponents' part; it is an accurate grasp of what Jesus is claiming. Lutheran and dispensational readings sometimes flatten this exchange into a Law/Gospel contrast (Jesus supersedes Sabbath regulations). The Reformed reading goes further: Jesus is not primarily making a point about the Sabbath law's status — He is making a point about His own identity as the one who does the Father's work of giving life and executing judgment. The Sabbath controversy is the occasion; Christological identity is the claim.

The Equal Honor of the Son (v. 23)

The statement "*that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father*" is contested across traditions. Arian and semi-Arian readings historically have argued this implies the Son's honor is derivative and dependent — that the Father grants it, which implies subordination of being. Orthodox Trinitarian exegesis (Reformed included) has consistently read this differently: the *functional* pattern of the Son's doing only what He sees the Father doing (v. 19) is relational and economic — it describes the eternal pattern of the Son's relationship to the Father within the Godhead — not an ontological subordination of being or dignity. The equal honor demand of verse 23 is not a compensation for lesser status; it is a statement of the Son's genuine ontological equality. John's prologue (1:1) provides the canonical key: the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 5's discourse elaborates and applies this, it does not qualify it. The Reformed reading, grounded in Nicene orthodoxy, holds that the Son's dependence on the Father is relational-eternal within the immanent Trinity, not a sign of lesser divinity.

The Realized Eschatology of Verses 24–25

Jesus says the one who hears His word and believes “has eternal life and does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (v. 24). This has generated the well-known Reformed/Arminian tension over the assurance and security of salvation. Arminian and Wesleyan traditions typically read “has passed” as describing a present state that can be forfeited — the verb’s perfect tense is real but conditioned on continued faith. The Reformed reading insists the perfect tense (*metabebēken*) is genuinely effective and permanent — it describes an accomplished transition, not a provisional one. The broader context of John supports this: the Good Shepherd discourse (John 10), the Father’s gift of the elect (John 6:37–40, 17:6–12), and the explicit “no one will snatch them” language all cohere to describe an irreversible transfer from the realm of death to the realm of life. The Arminian reading requires importing a conditionality the text itself does not state and the surrounding Johannine context actively resists. The Reformed reading is preferred as most faithful to the text’s own grammar and canonical context.

The Role of Moses and Scripture (vv. 39–47)

Dispensational readings sometimes treat Jesus’ indictment of the Pharisees for reading Moses wrongly as evidence that the Old Testament’s primary function was to prepare Israel for a future earthly kingdom, and that the Pharisees’ error was a category error about Israel’s national program. This reading is unnecessary and imports a framework the text does not supply. Jesus’ point is far simpler and more devastating: *Moses wrote of Me*. The entire Mosaic witness — not just messianic prophecies narrowly construed, but the whole Torah — testifies to Christ. The Pharisees’ failure is not a failure of prophetic interpretation about national programs; it is a failure of heart — they search the Scriptures to have life in them (v. 39), treating the container as the end rather than recognizing that the Scriptures are testimonial literature pointing to a person. The Reformed and redemptive-historical reading is clearly preferred here: the Old Testament is a unified witness to Christ, and every failure to recognize this is ultimately a failure of heart and will, not merely of interpretive method.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 2:1–3 / Exodus 20:8–11** — The Sabbath established as God’s rest after creative work; Jesus’ claim in John 5:17 that He and the Father work on the Sabbath is a direct claim to participate in divine providential activity — giving life and judging — that transcends the Sabbath ordinance by revealing the one it was always pointing toward.
- **Deuteronomy 19:15** — The requirement of multiple witnesses to establish a matter; Jesus consciously structures His defense in John 5:31–40 around this legal principle, marshaling four witnesses (John, His works, the Father, Moses), demonstrating that His claim meets and exceeds Israel’s own evidentiary standard.

- **Isaiah 43:10–13** — The LORD summons witnesses to establish His identity as the only God, the only Savior; John 5’s witness-structure echoes this pattern — Jesus is doing what YHWH does in Isaiah: presenting credentials, indicting unbelief, and claiming sole saving authority.
- **Daniel 7:13–14** — The Son of Man given dominion, glory, and judgment by the Ancient of Days; Jesus’ claim to have received authority to execute judgment (John 5:22, 27) and to be honored as the Father is honored directly echoes the Danielic Son of Man who receives universal sovereignty — a claim His opponents in John 5 understood precisely.
- **John 1:1–18** — The prologue’s declaration that the Word was God and that in Him was life (1:4) provides the doctrinal framework that John 5’s narrative and discourse display in action: the life-giving and judging authority Jesus claims in chapter 5 are the prologue’s *logos* and *zōē* displayed in confrontation with human unbelief.

Aim: To press the reader toward the unavoidable verdict about Jesus’ identity that this chapter demands, and to expose every strategy of evasion — including the use of Scripture itself as a substitute for coming to Christ.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	Setting: Jesus at the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem; multitude of disabled people wait for the moving of the water	John notes the occasion (a feast) and the place; the scene establishes the depth of human need and the futility of waiting for healing by natural means
4	<i>(Textual note: v. 4 absent in earliest manuscripts — the angel tradition explaining the water movement is a later addition explaining v. 7)</i>	Most modern translations bracket or footnote v. 4; the analysis proceeds from vv. 1–3 and 5 without relying on v. 4
5–6	Jesus sees the man who has been ill thirty-eight years; asks: “Do you want to get well?”	The question is not rhetorical cruelty — it surfaces whether the man wants healing or has accommodated himself to his condition; Jesus initiates entirely without the man’s

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
7	The man explains his problem: he has no one to help him into the water, and someone always gets there first	request His answer does not address Jesus' question — he explains his circumstances instead of answering whether he wants to be healed; a small but telling portrait of human helplessness
8–9a	Jesus commands: “Get up, take your mat and walk” — immediately the man is healed and walks	The word alone accomplishes complete healing; no ritual, no process, no community support — sovereign command and immediate result
9b	John notes: this happened on the Sabbath	The editorial note is the pivot of the entire chapter — the healing's timing makes the confrontation inevitable
10–13	Jewish leaders challenge the man for carrying his mat on the Sabbath; he identifies his healer as the one who commanded him; he does not know who Jesus is	The man deflects responsibility to his healer; Jesus has withdrawn from the scene; initial confrontation is between the leaders and the healed man
14	Jesus finds the man in the temple and warns: “Stop sinning, or something worse may happen to you”	The severity of the warning connects physical condition with moral/spiritual state without specifying the exact relationship; Jesus presses past the physical healing to the spiritual need
15–16	The man reports Jesus to the authorities; the Jewish leaders begin to persecute Jesus for healing on the Sabbath	The man's response to Jesus' further engagement is to report Him — a quiet but pointed detail about the limits of gratitude and the nature of human response to Christ
17	Jesus' defense: “My Father	The claim is to share in the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	is working until now, and I am working”	Father’s ongoing providential activity (giving life, executing judgment); this is not merely a Sabbath argument — it is an ontological claim
18	The leaders understand the claim correctly: Jesus is making Himself equal with God; they seek to kill Him	John’s editorial note confirms the leaders heard Jesus accurately; their response is murderous, not merely offended
19–20	The Son does only what He sees the Father doing; the Father loves the Son and shows Him everything He does; greater works will follow	The functional dependence of the Son on the Father is grounded in love and transparency — the Father hides nothing from the Son; this is a relationship of mutual delight, not mere subordination
21	As the Father raises the dead and gives life, so the Son gives life to whom He wills	The verb “wills” (<i>thelei</i>) is significant — it is not mechanical but volitional; the Son sovereignly and willingly gives life; the Father’s life-giving prerogative is fully shared
22–23	The Father has given all judgment to the Son so that all will honor the Son as they honor the Father; to dishonor the Son is to dishonor the Father	The purpose clause (“so that”) makes the equal honor of Son and Father a deliberate divine design, not incidental
24	“Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life”	The present tense “has” and the perfect “has passed” together describe a present possession of eternal life and a completed transition — past-tense event, present-tense reality
25	“An hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead	Realized eschatology — the resurrection-hour has

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live”	already arrived in Jesus’ presence; spiritual resurrection is already occurring through His word
26–27	The Father has granted the Son to have life in Himself; He has given Him authority to execute judgment because He is the Son of Man	Both life-giving and judging are delegated authorities — reflecting not inferiority but the relational pattern of Father and Son within the Godhead; “Son of Man” echoes Daniel 7
28–29	The hour is coming when all in the tombs will hear His voice and come out — to resurrection of life or resurrection of judgment	Future bodily resurrection is now added to the present spiritual resurrection; the scope of Christ’s authority is universal and final
30	The Son judges only as He hears from the Father; His judgment is just because He seeks the Father’s will, not His own	Reinforces the functional unity of Father and Son in judgment; the justice of the final judgment is guaranteed by its divine origin
31–32	If Jesus testifies about Himself alone, His testimony is not valid; but the Father bears witness to Him	Jesus applies Israel’s own legal standard (Deut. 19:15); He is not claiming exemption from evidential requirements — He is about to exceed them
33–35	John the Baptist: he testified to the truth; Jesus does not accept human testimony but mentions John for the sake of the hearers; John was a burning and shining lamp	First witness: the Forerunner; Jesus affirms John’s testimony but does not rely on it — it is offered for the benefit of those who “rejoiced for a while” in John’s light
36	The works the Father has given Jesus to accomplish testify that the Father has sent Him	Second witness: the works themselves — the healings, signs, and demonstrations of divine authority
37–38	The Father who sent Him has also testified; but His opponents have never heard	Third witness: the Father; Jesus’ opponents cannot receive this testimony

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	the Father's voice or seen His form, and the Father's word does not abide in them	because the Father's word is not in them — their problem is not informational but spiritual
39–40	They search the Scriptures thinking to have life in them — and the Scriptures testify about Jesus — yet they are unwilling to come to Him to have life	The devastating diagnosis: Scripture-searching that bypasses Christ produces death, not life; the Scriptures are testimonial, not terminal — they point to a person
41–44	Jesus does not receive glory from people; His opponents do not have the love of God in them; they receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from God	The idol-diagnosis: the root failure is glory-seeking from the wrong source — human approval rather than divine; this is why they cannot believe
45–47	Moses himself is the accuser; they have set their hope on Moses but do not believe Moses; if they believed Moses they would believe Jesus, because Moses wrote of Him	Fourth witness: Moses; the final irony — the very authority they cite as their credential is the authority that indicts them; Moses is their accuser, not their advocate

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–9a	The Sovereign Healer: Word and Immediate Life
2	9b–18	The Provocative Sabbath: From Confrontation to Christological Claim
3	19–30	The Self-Testimony: Equal Authority, Life, and Judgment
4	31–40	The Witness Array: Four Testimonies and a Diagnosis
5	41–47	The Final Indictment:

Division	Verses	Label
		Misplaced Glory and Moses as Accuser

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The Son of God presents His full credentials and demands a verdict.

Primary Claim: Jesus does not merely ask for belief — He summons every available witness, indicts every form of evasion, and presents Himself as the sole source of life and the appointed judge of all, demanding that the reader decide who He actually is.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine whether you are using Scripture to find life rather than to find Christ.

(*Mind/belief*)

Jesus' indictment in verses 39–40 is aimed at people who were diligent students of Scripture — not at those who ignored it. Their error was treating the Scriptures as an end in themselves, as the container of life rather than the testimony pointing to the life-giver. This is not a hypothetical danger. Bible study, theological education, doctrinal formation, and church involvement can all become strategies for managing one's relationship with God at a safe distance from Jesus Himself. The question is not whether you read Scripture but what you expect to find there. If you are reading to accumulate knowledge, to win arguments, to satisfy religious obligation, or to feel secure in your standing — and are not moving toward the person the Scripture relentlessly points to — then you are repeating the Pharisees' error with better study habits. Come to Him to have life (v. 40). The Bible is the signpost. Christ is the destination.

2. Receive the assurance of John 5:24 as a completed verdict, not a provisional hope.

(*Affections/worship*)

Jesus says the one who believes “has passed from death to life” — not “is in the process of passing” or “may pass if they persevere.” The verb is perfect tense: a completed action with ongoing results. This is not a claim about your spiritual performance; it is a claim about a sovereign transfer that has already occurred. Many believers live in a low-grade anxiety about their standing with God — a quiet fear that the verdict is not quite in, that the case is still being adjudicated, that one serious sin or one period of spiritual coldness could overturn the outcome. This text calls that anxiety out as a failure to receive what Jesus has actually said. The verdict is in. You have passed. The judge who will preside over the final resurrection (v. 28–29) is the same one who has already declared your transfer from death to life. Receive this not as a theological proposition to assent to but as news to be moved by, to rest in, to worship from.

3. Take seriously the connection Jesus draws between physical need and spiritual condition. (*Mind/belief*)

When Jesus finds the healed man in the temple and says “Stop sinning, or something worse may happen to you” (v. 14), He is not establishing a simple one-to-one correlation between sin and suffering. But He is establishing that physical healing without spiritual transformation is an incomplete and ultimately dangerous mercy. The man had been healed but had not believed, had not followed, had returned instead to report Jesus to His opponents. Jesus’ warning presses past the body to the soul. The temptation in pastoral and personal application is to stop at the physical or circumstantial level — to be grateful for what God has resolved in the visible world while leaving untouched what He is pressing on in the invisible. Do not treat relief from suffering as the final word. Ask what God is doing in the suffering and beyond the relief. The worse thing Jesus warns against is not physical paralysis — it is continued death of the soul in the presence of the life-giver.

4. Identify where you are receiving glory from people rather than seeking the glory that comes from God. (*Affections/worship*)

Jesus locates the root of His opponents’ unbelief not in intellectual inadequacy but in misplaced glory-seeking: “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (v. 44). This is the idol-diagnosis the text itself provides. Unbelief is not primarily an intellectual problem — it is a worship problem. The Pharisees could not receive Jesus because to do so would have cost them the approval of their community, the recognition of their peers, the status they had built within the religious system. This is not a first-century problem. Identify the communities whose approval you most need, the voices whose verdict on your life most shapes your choices. Where those pull against coming to Christ — against repentance, against confession, against public identification with the gospel — you have found your version of the Pharisees’ idol. “Do not seek the glory that comes from the only God” is a description of what happens when that idol wins. Seek it instead.

5. Stop living as though your judgment is still pending. (*Will/behavior*)

The realized eschatology of John 5:24–25 has concrete behavioral consequences. If you have heard Christ’s voice and believed, you have already passed from death to life. The resurrection of judgment (v. 29) is not in your future. Live accordingly. This means making decisions — about money, time, relationships, vocation, risk, and sacrifice — from the position of someone whose verdict is already rendered, not from the position of someone trying to earn a favorable outcome. Specifically: identify one domain of your life where you are still hedging — still protecting yourself as though your standing with God depends on the outcome of that situation. The person who has passed from death to life does not need to protect that. Surrender it. The judge has already declared in your favor.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: John 5 is one of the most concentrated treatments of the doctrine of Christ in the entire New Testament. The chapter establishes that the Son shares in the Father's essential prerogatives of giving life and executing judgment — not as delegated functions from a lesser being but as the outworking of His eternal relationship with the Father within the Godhead. The equal-honor demand of verse 23 is one of the strongest Trinitarian statements in the Gospels: to dishonor the Son is to dishonor the Father, and vice versa — because they are not two separate beings related by decree but one God in whose being the Son fully participates. The chapter also presents salvation as a present possession and a completed transition: eternal life is not a future reward conditionally held but a present reality sovereignly granted through the Son's word. And the chapter establishes that all judgment — including the final resurrection and verdict — belongs to the Son, not merely in the sense of delegated administrative authority but because this is the Father's deliberate purpose for the one He has sent.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: John 5 is a foundational text for Reformed Christology, soteriology, and the doctrine of assurance. The Calvinist account of salvation — sovereign, effectual, irrevocable — is nowhere more plainly stated in John's Gospel than in verses 21 and 24: the Son gives life “to whom He wills” (not to all indiscriminately or conditionally), and those who believe “have passed” from death to life (accomplished transition, not provisional hope). The doctrine of monergism is embedded in the chapter's structure: Jesus heals the man at Bethesda without his request, initiates the conversation, issues the command, and produces the result by His word alone — the man contributes nothing but the paralysis. This pattern is not incidental to John's purpose; it models what the discourse then articulates theologically. The chapter also supports the Reformed commitment to the sufficiency and Christological unity of Scripture: Moses wrote of Christ (v. 46), meaning the entire Old Testament is a unified testimonial document pointing toward its own subject, and to read it otherwise — however diligently — is to misread it entirely. This is the hermeneutical principle that grounds both the Westminster Confession's treatment of Scripture and the Reformed homiletical tradition's insistence on Christ-centered preaching from every text.

Main Takeaway

Jesus is not offering one option among several for finding life — He is the life-giver, the life-holder, and the judge of all who ever lived, and He has presented His credentials with more witnesses than Israel's law requires. Every strategy for managing this claim at a distance — including diligent Scripture study that bypasses the person the Scriptures point to — is a

form of the unbelief Jesus indicts in this chapter. If you have heard His voice and believed, you have already passed from death to life. Live from that verdict. And if you have not yet come to Him — the witnesses have testified, the case is made, the one who will judge you on the last day is the same one inviting you now. Come to Him and have life.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the Bethesda healing to a model of compassionate ministry.** The healing is real, the compassion is real, but John does not linger on either as the point. The healing is a Christological provocation — it produces the Sabbath controversy that produces the discourse. Teaching this passage as primarily a lesson about reaching marginalized people robs it of its actual load-bearing function: establishing Jesus as the life-giver whose word alone accomplishes what no other power can. Do not let the application tail wag the exegetical dog.
- **Softening the Sabbath confrontation into a law-versus-grace lesson.** The confrontation is not primarily about the status of Mosaic Sabbath regulations in the new covenant. Jesus' defense — "My Father is working, and I am working" — is a claim to divine identity, not a dismissal of the Mosaic law. Flattening this into "Jesus supersedes the old Sabbath rules" loses the Christological force: Jesus is claiming to do what only God does on the Sabbath, give life and judge, and His opponents understood this correctly, which is why they wanted to kill Him (v. 18).
- **Treating the realized eschatology of vv. 24–25 as merely metaphorical.** Some readings flatten "passed from death to life" into a spiritual metaphor for conversion experience rather than an ontological claim about a genuine transfer of legal standing before God. This is not a metaphor for feeling spiritually renewed; it is a claim that the person who hears and believes has already crossed from the realm of condemnation into the realm of life. The future resurrection of vv. 28–29 is the same event projected forward — the present spiritual reality becomes a future bodily reality. Preach the full weight of both the present and future dimensions.
- **Missing the idol-diagnosis in vv. 41–44.** This is one of the most penetrating passages on the root of unbelief in the New Testament, and it is frequently preached past in the rush to get to the Moses material. Jesus does not say His opponents failed to believe because they were intellectually stubborn or hermeneutically incompetent. He says they could not believe because they were receiving glory from one another rather than seeking the glory that comes from God. This is Tim Keller's idol-diagnosis buried in John 5: the true savior is displaced by a social approval system. Name this clearly. It is the root issue, not a footnote.
- **Treating the four witnesses as a legal curiosity rather than a pastoral confrontation.** Jesus' witness-structure (vv. 31–40) is not primarily a doctrinal argument for apologetics — it is a pastoral indictment. He is not building a case for

skeptics to consider academically; He is confronting people who already had all the evidence they needed and had chosen not to receive it. The failure to come to Him (v. 40) is a failure of will and heart, not of information. Preach the witnesses as evidence already rendered, not evidence still being gathered, and press on why the hearers are not responding rather than on the logical adequacy of the case.

- **Extracting the “Moses wrote of me” statement (v. 46) without its confrontational force.** Preachers rightly love this verse as a license for Christocentric Old Testament preaching. But in context it is not an invitation — it is an indictment. Moses is Jesus’ accuser of these men, not their ally. The force of verse 46 is not “you should know the Old Testament points to Christ” but “the authority you have placed your hope in is the authority currently testifying against you.” The accusation is aimed at people who were devoted to the Mosaic text and were still missing it. Maintain the sting.