

HEALING AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

“A THEOLOGY OF HEALING”

Second in a sermon series by James R Blades, Senior Pastor
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I heard the following story making its circuit among lawyers.

A man claims that an auto accident has permanently bound him to a wheel chair and a sympathetic judge awards him a million dollars. When the verdict is announced, the highly skeptical insurance company lawyer snaps: “You’re going to be tailed by a private eye wherever you go from now on and as soon as you take one step out of that wheel chair, we’ll throw you in jail.”

The man smiles and responds, “Don’t go to all the trouble; I’ll tell you where to find me. First I’m going from here to the Waldorf in New York, then to the Savoy in London, then to the Ritz in Paris, then to the French Riviera ... and finally to Lourdes for the miracle.”

I think we have all learned to be skeptical of what we call healing miracles: The fakery that so obviously surrounds many of them. The sensationalism of the healing crusades and evangelists in their diamond studded rings. Many of us, when we think of faith and healing, have these images lurking around the back of our minds and we are rightfully cynical.

Yet, healing was clearly the heart of Jesus’ ministry. He preached “The kingdom of God is at hand” and he demonstrated it by his healing works. Healing was also clearly at the core of Jesus’ commission to his followers. Luke chapter 9 says: “Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all evil spirits and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.”

In Luke’s next chapter, “the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him to every town and place where he intended to go. “Whenever you enter a town,” he told them, “... Cure the sick and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.”

Back when I was in the early grades, we had a classroom activity where students took turns bringing in an object of interest to the student which they were invited to talk to the class about. I don’t think they do that anymore but I’ll bet many of you remember it. It was called, “Show and tell.”

That was Jesus mission to this world and it was his commission to his disciples: “Show and tell.” Not just tell that the Kingdom of God is near, but the show of it. Not just preach the message of God’s imminent favor but demonstrate it by works of God’s intervening power.

All through the Gospels you see this twofold theme. And in the Acts of the Disciples you see it too. “And now Lord,” they prayed, “take note of our adversaries’ threats and help your servants to proclaim your message with all boldness, by stretching out your hand to heal and to work miracles through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

Now that word “miracles” is a bit of a misleading translation of the original Greek.

The word is *dunamis*, from which we get our word dynamite. A *dunamis* is simply a demonstration of God’s power.

Paul says, "...our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit."¹

The whole point is that everywhere you look in the New Testament, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is more than a proclamation of God's word; it is a demonstration of God's power? Not a circle with one epicenter, but an ellipse with two epicenters.

Let take the matter further. When we say Jesus is Savior and that Jesus, saves what does this mean? I remember before I became a Christian, someone would say to me "Are you saved? Do you want to receive Jesus as your Savior," I didn't have the slightest idea what they were talking about. Saved? Saved from what?

Now that I have been a pastor for thirty years, I wonder if Christians themselves know what they are talking about.

When we talk about salvation; when we claim Jesus as our Savior, what do we mean by that?

Here's what a lot of folks mean: That Jesus saves us from a hellish hereafter.

I submit to you that the New Testament concept of salvation is vastly broader. Sure Jesus saves our eternity when we put our faith in Him. But he saves us here and now too. How so?

Notice that in the word "salvation" is the root of another word: "salve." What is salve? It is something that promotes healing. "There is balm in Gilead that heals the sin sick soul." Balm is another word for salve, isn't it? And it's not just our souls the Balm in Gilead heals. It's our bodies and minds and relationships too.

The New Testament concept of salvation is salvation from brokenness to wholeness, salvation from illness to health, salvation from oppression to liberty, salvation from ignorance and to understanding! The saving power of Jesus is the healing power of Jesus not just of our souls but of our whole selves. That's why Jesus and his disciples not only promised heaven in the hereafter but healed present ills in the here and now.

Where did we get the idea that salvation just has to do sparing our souls to eternity? Go back to that dualistic Greek influence we talked about last week: The idea that the soul is good and the body evil, that the soul is eternal and the body expendable, that the activities of the soul are wholesome while the passions of the body are base and vile. That idea has come right down to us across the centuries from the Desert Fathers who thought if they could mortify the body, they could enhance the soul. If they could starve the body, they could enrich the spirit. It shows right up in our hymns and songs: "I know he ransomed my soul," we sing. "There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul."

I'm here to tell you that this divided view of dualistic humanity of body and soul, or of tripartite body, soul and spirit is utterly unbiblical. To the Hebrew (Jesus was a Hebrew) the human being is all of one piece. When the Hebrew Scriptures refer to the soul, they are referring to the whole self, not just part. "Praise the Lord O my soul" means "Praise the Lord all that is within me ..."²

True, Paul in the New Testament talks about the war within us between "the flesh and the spirit." "For what the **flesh** desires is opposed to the Spirit," says Paul, "and what the **Spirit** desires is opposed to the **flesh**; for these are opposed to each other ..." So isn't Paul making reference to a dualistic nature here? It seems so until you understand that

¹ 1Thessalonians 1:5

² Psalm 103

Paul's reference to "the flesh" is not a reference to the body, but to the power at work in our whole selves that makes us want to sin. The Spirit he refers to is not our spirit but God's Spirit. Our whole fallen human nature, the flesh, is at enmity with God's Spirit that lives in us.

Not only does the Bible teach that our humanity is of one piece, indivisible, but experience teaches it too. When something goes wrong with your body, does it not impact your thinking? Your feeling? Your relationship with God? When a person is feeling depressed, does that depression not effect that person's body chemistry? And when ones innermost self is infected with resentment, does it not distress ones body and mind and relationships all? Modern research sustains this holistic notion of our humanity at every turn.

I have to frankly admit that when someone talks to me about spiritual counsel or spiritual healing or spiritual guidance, I get confused. Because there is no such thing as a spirit apart from a body or a body apart from a soul. That's why James in the New Testament links the anointing for healing of sickness with the confession of sins.³ That's why Jesus said to the paralytic: "Your sins are forgiven; arise and walk." The healing of the soul is inextricably linked to the healing of the body and vice-versa.

That's why, at the heart of Christian theology, too, there is a resurrection of the body. The idea of the soul departing from the body and going to some paradise is not Biblical. It's Greek. Jesus rose from the dead with a heavenly body and promises the same to us because without a body, we are not whole human beings.

Someone asks me, "Are you saved?" I have to say, "No, I am being saved." All of life walking with Jesus Christ is God's healing power at work in us, making us whole. The work of healing is not complete, not consummated, until that Great Gettin' Up Day.

Now this leads us to another issue regarding healing. Last week, I said "Healing is always the will of God." The New Testament richly sustains that claim. Never do you hear Jesus saying to the sick, "Go home; I'm not going to heal you because I want your sickness to teach you a lesson," or to the oppressed, "Your oppression is a discipline for your soul." Never do you see Jesus Christ cozying up to the ills of this world and treating them as instruments of God. He came to oppose them. He went to the Cross to vanquish them. "Upon him was the suffering that made us whole, and by his wounds we are healed."

"Okay," I can hear some of you saying, "if it is always God's will to heal, then why do people in *God's* world get sick and why when we pray for their healing does *God* not heal them all?"

In seminary, I learned a concept that has always helped me put God's will into perspective: "The already but not yet."

Jesus died to take away our sins (the already) but the scourge of sin is still with us as long as we live on this earth (the not yet). God has promised us all the bliss of heaven (the already) but we still suffer the troubles and tears and sorrows and pains of this life (the not yet). Jesus came to bring peace on earth (the already) but we still suffer the ugliness of human conflict and war (the not yet). It is wholly God's will to take away our sins, wholly God's will to shower us with the treasures of heaven, wholly God's will that the world live at peace. Jesus came into this world to secure these benefits and his work is done. The fact that God's will is not yet consummated doesn't make it any less his will.

³ James 5:

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

This already-but-not-yet principle applies to healing. God’s will is to heal. The drive of God’s motive is to heal but we all still get sick and die; even those who have experienced what we might call miracles of healing. (Lazarus was raised from the dead in the Gospels. But the day surely came when Lazarus got sick again and died.)

All healing on this side of the grave is temporary.

Why does God heal some in answer to prayer and not others? Why does God heal one person through a *miracle* and another through medical treatments which are also God’s gifts? Why does God give one the grace of renewed health and another the grace to live with his infirmity or to die with that infirmity? I don’t know. No one knows.

These matters are in the hands of an all knowing and all loving God. We don’t get answers but we always get God’s caring, strengthening, hope-giving presence as long as we are willing to receive it.

So where does this leave us? Let’s sum up a theology of healing and the Christian Faith.

1. Healing is God’s will; always God’s will
2. Healing is the epicenter of the Christian message
3. Salvation is healing; the process of healing at work in the lives of those who trust Jesus
4. This salvation, this healing is for the whole person, not just the soul
5. God has already paid the price for our healing, but we have not yet entered into the consummation of it
6. The resurrection of the dead and the coming of Jesus is the healing consummation which we await, yes await, through all this world’s ills.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the former things have passed away."

And what do we do while we wait? Sit on our hands? Next week, we’ll seek the answer to that question.