

Helping Those Who Are "Sick"

A Sermon by Rev. Grant H. Odhner

And when [Jesus] had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of disease and all kinds of weakness.. These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: ... Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. (Mt 10.1,5,8)

So they went out...and they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them. (Mk 6.12f)

All of us have known the pain and frustration of being sick. We can all appreciate, then, the great gift that the Lord gave to His disciples: the ability to bring relief and comfort to those in physical distress.

This power that the Lord gave to His first disciples is not a power that He gives to everyone. Still, it corresponds to another kind of power that He does give to all who follow Him--a power just as real and beautiful.

But first, let us note that the problems which the disciples dealt with were mostly physical ones ("all kinds of disease and all kinds of weakness," also bodily death itself. They also cast out demons, which indeed afflicted the mind, but the emphasis in casting them out was on the freeing of the body.

On a deeper level these conditions are symbolic of problems that plague our spiritual lives. The Lord does care about our physical well-being. His providence works continually to restore order to all levels of creation and to bring relief. But more important in His eyes is our spiritual well-being. What are we learning? How are we progressing in our capacity to feel compassion, mercy, forgiveness toward others? Where are we headed? What are our goals? What are our attitudes? These matters-of-spirit are the key to our real happiness or unhappiness. Viewed in its deeper meaning, the Word deals with these spiritual issues.

What are the diseases that our spirit suffers from? They are selfish lusts and fears, anger, impatience, brooding resentments, denial and delusional fantasies, building up oneself at other's expense, and so forth. These evils sicken our spiritual life. They commit us to a sickbed

of self-pampering and self-preoccupation. They cripple us, so that we can't get on with life, with learning and growing. They sap our energy for wishing well to others and serving them. They draw our force and attention from our work and from our important relationships. All the diseases and afflictions mentioned in the Word are symbolic of some kind of negative thought and emotion, and their effect on the spiritual life. The Lord's cures, and the disciples', picture the healing that the Lord can bring, by His mercy, through His truth. And since we are instruments of the Lord's mercy and truth, like the disciples we too can be a part of His means of bringing healing to others.

How do we deal with people who are in a state of spiritual sickness? How can we help? How do we respond when we are faced with another's anxiety, restlessness, lack of sensitivity to other's needs, apathy, self-pity?

First of all, it's important to realize that these evils are not from the person, but from hell. In other words, it's important not to ascribe guilt to the person. We can judge of the evil itself, but not of the nature of the person who is receiving it. Even people who are being regenerated by the Lord experience evil states of mind. The Lord allows this so that they can learn what evil is like and so they can learn to resist it. We call these states of tasting evil "temptation." And we read:

When a person is tempted, unclean spirits are near him, and surround him, and excite the evils and falsities with him, and also hold [his attention] in them and exaggerate them, even to despair. Hence it is that the person is then in squalor and uncleanness. (AC 5246.2 cf. HD 197.4)

Other's horrible moods and outbursts are from no other source than hell. We can think of them as a product of temptation.

The Christian response to evil in others is not a retaliatory one. Unfortunately, we often react this way. We respond to selfishness with selfishness of our own. We let others' sicknesses drag us down. We interpret their behavior as an attack on us. Instead of being inwardly sympathetic to what they are going through, we think only of how unpleasantly they are acting toward us, how hurt we feel, how undeserving we are of such treatment, or perhaps how inconvenient it is for us that they are so wrapped up in themselves. In short, we fight evil

with evil, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"--either by direct retaliation or by withdrawing our support from them.

The early Christian evangelist, Paul, caught the proper spirit of Christian love when he wrote:

Love suffers long and is kind; love ...does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; [love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. (I Cor 13.4-8)

This kind of love comes from the Lord, who is..

...merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and of great mercy. He [does] not deal with us according to our sins, nor [reward] us according to our iniquities.. As far as the east is from the west, so far [does] He [remove] our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust. (Ps 103.8,10,12-14)

The Lord is all forgiveness. When we are in temptation, He does not give up on us! He does not forget all our former efforts. He does not conclude, on the basis of our present words and actions, that we no longer want (deep inside) to be right with Him. He doesn't listen to our cursing and our frantic, selfish prayers-of-the-moment (AC 8165, 8179; cf. 8567). Deep within He is working to keep us in hope and trust; He's sustaining us in our efforts to resist hell--even though we may be unaware of this, because hell is focusing our attention elsewhere (AC 6097, 4586, 1937; HD 200.4; cf. AC 3639; AE 730.33). The Lord thinks of the outcome, of the end-in-view, which is that we may come to know and value heaven.

What a contrast to the way we tend to be! And yet we all know what it is like when someone deals with us in this spirit--when they "lay down their life for us"--lay down their own pride, their own present needs and wishes, their own plans--for the sake of us, their friend.

When others react without defensiveness to our offenses, this is sometimes just what we need to make us realize how horrible are the spirits that we've been entertaining. A patient, attentive, silence can be like a cool cloth soothing a feverish head, or like a soft caress on an anxious brow. What a relief when another person ignores our cursing,

when we wake up forgiven! What a blessing it is when we know that another has understood that we really didn't mean what we said or did or failed to do! How grateful it is when we sense that another is willing to look with trust to our better self, rather than retaliating against the self that we are showing!

The helping spirit that we're describing here involves self-control and self-denial. We cannot help those who are spiritually "sick" unless we can control that first impulse to defend ourselves. We must fight the urge to lash back when we feel "smitten on the cheek." We must fight the urge to withhold our warm and protecting "cloak" when someone has seemingly abused our kindness. We must fight that urge to refuse to "walk that extra mile" with someone, because we feel compelled or taken for granted (Mt 6.38-41).

This patient and trusting attitude from others helps us immensely in our recovery from spiritual sickness--if not at the moment, then in retrospect. This is the spirit of Christian love. This love is the "oil" with which the disciples were to "anoint the sick" when the Lord sent them out (Mk 6.12f). "Oil" stands for this love, which alone heals and soothes. The power of such love is represented in the "laying on of hands," another means of healing that the Lord gave His disciples (Mk 16.17). "Spiritual power," we read, is nothing else than "to will the good of another, and to will to convey to another as far as possible [the love that] is with oneself" (AE 79). All power lies in love, in willing well from love, in reaching out to help from love.

Now it is important to realize that love's power must work through wisdom. In communicating to us the humble spirit of love in the New Testament the Lord was not dictating behavior. It's possible for us to defer to others--letting them slap us on the cheek, and take our cloak, and make us walk an extra mile with them--for the wrong reasons. We can do it from cowardice and from wanting to be liked. And in doing it for the wrong reasons we can actually cause great harm.

Love is ineffective unless it acts with wisdom. Wisdom guides love, disciplines it, channels it to achieve its ends. It's true that love does not fight evil in others with evil, but it does sometimes fight the evil. We must act prudently and not with blind formulas. Love senses when it can actively help and when it cannot, when it should encourage and when it must stand by silently and watch--indeed, when it must teach and

reprove. Love cannot facilitate a lasting healing unless it does so with wisdom.

This is why the disciples, when they healed or cast out a demon or raised someone from the dead, did so "in the Lord's name." Doing something "in the Lord's name" means doing it from the Lord's truth. His "name" is the way in which He is known, it is a means of describing and communicating what He is like. This is what truth is: a means of describing and communicating the Lord's love and goodness. We know His love through the truth.

We've been talking about our ability as the Lord's disciples to bring spiritual relief to others. And it may seem that this involves chiefly doing things for them, acting toward them in certain ways. In actual fact, the most effective way to help in the healing of others is to deal with our own sicknesses--in the same unselfish, tolerant, trusting spirit of love and wisdom. We bring the most relief to others by being ourselves a part of the Lord's kingdom, by living a life according to His commandments, by allowing Him to bring us into an order in which we can transmit His life more fully. When we do this we ease the burdens, and give strength to the lives, of everyone whom we touch.

After all, we cannot really "cast out demons" from others. The Lord alone can do it. And the decision to let healing take place ultimately belongs to each individual. Each of us must make the effort to "cast out the demons," to throw off the "germ," to become well. The freedom and will-power to cooperate is a gift to each human being from the Lord. This is why we must place priority on working on our own sicknesses. With ourselves, we can deal from the inside: we can be directly instrumental in "casting out demons." With others, we can only deal from the outside.

This said, let us not underestimate the power that we have to affect the spiritual quality of other's lives. This is a frightening thing, in a way, but we can do harm to others as well as help them! We can make life more difficult for them, as well as less difficult! We can enhance their freedom, or we can be the occasion for their stumbling. We can enrich their spirits with needed information, or we can let them grope in the dark. Both possibilities must exist, if human freedom is to be a real freedom.

But think how sad it would be if we could have no real influence on others, if we could bring them no blessing or joy or relief that reached

beyond their physical and worldly well-being! If this were the case, there could be no real friendship, no exchange of spiritual kindnesses, no conjunction of hearts and minds!

And so, the Lord has provided that we can participate in His joy of helping others. He invites us to learn the wisdom-of-love from Him--we cannot affect others for good unless we learn this wisdom). The Lord's first disciples, who were sent out to heal, were called "disciples" because they were learners. Only the laws of love, taught in the Word, learned by us, can mold us into people who can effectively minister to those who are "sick" in spirit.

But in the final analysis, the power of truth is from love. The power to heal which the Lord gave His first disciples was symbolic of a real power that comes from love--from the Lord's love with us. And it's this love that makes a disciple a disciple. As the Lord said:

By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (Jn 13.35)

And it's significant that, in the Gospel of Mark, the Lord's parting words to His disciples contained this promise:

These signs will follow those who believe: in My name they will cast out demons; ... they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover. (16.17)

These words are a charge as well as a promise. If we are disciples we will have love for one another. And if we truly have love for one another, these signs will show themselves. Working in the Lord's name we will touch other's lives for good. We will make it easier for those around us to be free of their demons. We will reach out to them with our "hands" in ways that inspire them to spiritual recovery and health. This will be the affect of our life. What a beautiful promise! Let us rise to this challenge! Amen.

Lessons: Is 58.1-9; Mt 10.1-8,40-42; AC 1820.2-5.