

“CARING FOR THE SICK”

John 5:1-15

Introduction

In 2006, we took a team from our church to the Central African Republic. We called ourselves “spies” because we went with the specific purpose of scoping out the land for future ministries. While there, we visited a small pharmacy at the clinic of Dr. Yalipendi and his wife, Susan.

By then, I was aware of the devastation that diseases like malaria, diarrhea and other perfectly treatable illnesses were causing throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. What I didn’t know was how inexpensive the remedy was.

Susan showed me the little pills that can cure malaria and diarrhea. She opened a packet and let me see it. Then she said, “20 cents, that’s all it costs to get one of those.” “20 cents,” I said, “then why aren’t people getting them?” I will never forget her answer. She said, “Because they are too busy dying from hunger first.”

In other words, what is killing people is not so much the diseases themselves, it is that they are too poor to have access to any kind of care. What she was saying was, when people are preoccupied with hunger, everything else becomes secondary. Every ounce of energy, every brain cell and creative fiber, every transaction must be focused on finding a way to survive and spending 20 cents on a pill, even if they did have it, could result in sentencing another family member to death from starvation. That is the plight of the poor in most underdeveloped countries in the world.

The leading cause of death in under-resourced countries is lack of clean water. 1.8 million people die every year from water-borne illnesses, including 3,900 children per day.

As a matter of fact, before I end this sentence, one child will die from hunger somewhere in the world. This happens every five seconds. And one child dies from malaria every thirty seconds. This means that by the time I am done with this message, more than 420 children will have died from either malaria or water-borne diseases. Is that acceptable to you?

Here is another fact to help give perspective to all of this: in 2007, Americans spent \$450 billion on Christmas. And if this isn’t painful enough, here are some other facts about spending habits of people and governments you might not know about.

Items	\$U.S. Billions per year
Cosmetics in the U.S.	8
Ice cream in Europe	11
Perfumes in Europe and the U.S.	12
Pet foods in Europe and the U.S.	17
Business entertainment in Japan	35
Cigarettes in Europe	50
Alcoholic drinks in Europe	105
Narcotics drugs in the world	400
Military spending in the world	780

Most people living in the wealthiest nation of the world don’t concern themselves with these statistics. But how about the follower of Christ? What if I started asking you to open the books so I could see your spending habits? Don’t worry -- here at Grace we don’t require that for membership... But let’s not get ourselves off the hook that easily. If we are going to make a difference in caring for those who are hurting, we must be willing to ask ourselves the tough questions, like: “Do my spending habits please God? Am I engaged in His mission? Does my checkbook show that I care for the suffering people of this world?”

Now some of you may be sitting out there and thinking, *“Goodness gracious, when will this end? Every time I come to this church they are talking about the poor, the sick, the dying. I’m ready for something more upbeat, it’s Thanksgiving, give me a break!”*

It’s true, for the last five weeks, we’ve been delving deeply into the issue of compassion...and we’ve been talking about some pretty heavy stuff. Some of us would prefer that we do not talk about these issues because they are too painful. I understand, but I also feel obligated to tell you that these issues are close to the heart of God and so we must talk about them.

With that in mind today, as we end this series, for a season anyway, we would like to talk about, *“Caring for the Sick.”*

Again this is not an easy subject to talk about. As a matter of fact, there are some naysayers who don’t even believe the Church should get involved in these types of issues.

For over two thousand years, the Church has been following a Messiah who made no secret of the fact that He deeply cared for the hurting and dying. Yet after all these years, many in the Church still question whether caring for the *“least of these”* should be part of our mission or not. Today, we go back to school, so to speak, and learn from the Master Himself about the why’s and how’s of caring for the sick.

For a few moments, I just want to engage those who say that the Church has no business focusing on the hurting. So briefly let’s look at...

I. CRITICIZING LIKE SOME DO: ANSWERING THE NAYSAYERS.

We will try to answer the naysayers. They have many objections, but we will look at only two this morning. The first objection is:

- First objection: “It’s not part of the church’s mission.”

Over the years, we’ve been led to believe that the church should just preach the Gospel, make disciples, start other churches, and leave the social issues, like poverty, injustice, global calamities and disease for the government to take care of.

One pastor put it this way: *“What do orphans have to do with the Great Commission?”* This was asked after he heard Pastor Dave Atkins give an impassioned plea for his church to get involved with the work of rescuing orphans in SE Asia.

In response to this, I want to share the perspective of another Christian leader:

“People today find it odd that the Church founded by a Savior who came healing the sick and caring for the poor is now only marginally involved in His mission”
(Ed Stetzer, President, LifeWay Research).

Like I said, we are going back to school today. When Jesus made His first public statement about His earthly ministry, He was unmistakably clear. These are His inaugural words:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”
(Luke 4:18-19).

But the same Jesus, just a little later, also went further. He said:

“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

So, there you have it. If we are going to imitate Jesus in His mission, we must follow the Jesus of both Luke 4 and Luke 19.

When the curtain opened and Jesus entered the stage, He said clearly: *“I am here to serve the hurting.”* But, He also said, *“I am here to seek and save the lost.”* If we serve the hurting and don’t share the Gospel with them, we are missing out on the Jesus of the Bible. But, if we are verbally sharing the Gospel while ignoring the suffering of the poor, we are also missing out on the Jesus of the Bible.

I praise God there are Christians around the world that have not bought into this philosophy of only preaching and no action, or action and no preaching.

According to the World Health Organization, 40% of the healthcare in developing countries is provided by faith-based organizations, many of them run by dedicated Christians who have incorporated the Gospel into their practices. Also, in countries such as Burundi, about 80% of basic education is provided by church schools.

[How our church has contributed: well drilling, micro-enterprise and latrines].

- Second objection: “We should only help our own.”

A pastor in a major metropolitan area, and a dear friend of mine, when I pointed out to him that James says,

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is to look after orphans and widows in their distress...” (James 1:27).

He said, *“But I always thought he was only referring to widows and orphans in the church.”*

Another friend, when challenged about the words of Jesus,

“Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for Me” (Matthew 25:40),

said, *“He was only referring to Christians because He talked about ‘brothers.’”* Never mind that the passage talks about helping *“strangers.”*

All you have to do is take a cursory look at the Gospels and you will quickly discover that Jesus did not play favorites when it came to healing the sick.

The evangelist, Matthew put it this way:

“Wherever Jesus went, he healed people of every sort of disease and illness” (Matthew 9:35 NLT).

In another passage, he says pretty much the same thing:

“A vast crowd brought Him the lame, the blind, the crippled, mute, and many others with physical difficulties, and they laid them before Jesus and He healed them all” (Matthew 15:30 NLT).

And again:

“... He had compassion on them and healed their sick” (Matthew 14:14).

That’s how I know these texts of Scriptures have a broader application. So, the bottom line when it comes to answering the question, “*Why should we care?*” is ...

- *Jesus cared and so should we!*

Hopefully, this is enough to at least slow down the voice of the naysayers. Hopefully, you now have no doubt whatsoever as to why we should care for the sick. Now, let’s look at how we should care for them.

2. CARING LIKE JESUS DID: LEARNING FROM THE MASTER

Again, we look at the example of our Master. The first thing we learn is...

- Jesus traveled to be with the sick

John said in his Gospel,

“Now, there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool which is called Bethsaida... Here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralyzed” (John 5:2,3).

Now, please turn with me to John 5, where we learn about a time when Jesus healed a man in Jerusalem who had been crippled for 38 years.

Jesus was going to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the many feasts the Jews had, as indicated in verse 1. He was going somewhere. He had an appointment to keep. In all likelihood, He had people waiting for Him. But on the way there, He stopped at the pool of Bethsaida, where people would camp like Black Friday shoppers, not to get a great deal on a new laptop, but to get healing from an angel of

God when the waters were stirred. Why on earth, then, would Jesus make time to go somewhere where “*the blind, the lame, the paralyzed*” were known to hang out? Was this a detour? Was He looking for “*brothers*” there?

I hope you are as intrigued by this question as I am: “*What was Jesus doing in that part of town?*” This was not where the main party was going to be. There was no one “important” to see there. Didn’t Jesus know that only the most desperate, the mentally insane and the physically destitute dwelled there? Wasn’t He aware the Pool of Bethesda was mostly a place of unfulfilled dreams? Hadn’t He been told of the wailing of those whose healing was denied year after year? Didn’t He mind the smell of sickness, the stench of death that hovered over the place like a grimacing vulture?

My friends, the simple answer is: “*Jesus went there because He cared about the sick and the destitute.*” He went there *exactly* because of the people who were there. He went there because there was a man there who had reached the end of himself and Jesus was about to restore hope and healing to his body and soul. Jesus went there because the people lying around that pool mattered to God. They had also been created in the image of God, and as such, were perfect candidates for a special touch from the Messiah Himself.

So what motivated Jesus? Love for the “*least of these,*” regardless of who they were. Jesus had an appointment with a guy who had been out of luck for 38 years and this guy was about to have the shock of his life. Jesus was not only going after people who looked like Him. He was not going to the temple or the synagogue. He was not looking for “*brothers.*” This was not an accident. It was not an interruption in His schedule. Jesus put Himself where the sick were so He could interrupt the trajectory of their lives. Jesus came to where the sick and dying were so He could

give them hope. He was there to show us that He is the One who can bring the days of unfulfilled dreams to a swift end.

We are getting ready to celebrate one of the most meaningful seasons of the year, and what is Christmas if not the remarkable fact that God chose to assume human form and live among us mere mortals. Think about this: The God who made the universe, the Holy and lofty One, the powerful “*I am*,” deciding to travel and check into “Hotel Humanity.” I love the way Eugene Peterson put it in his translation of John 1:14:

*“The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood”* (John 1:14).

God illustrated to us if we are going to care for the hurting, we need to travel to where they are. We can’t heal by remote control, we have to go where the hurting are hurting.

Now, I realize some of you are not able to physically go, but that’s what so exciting about our church. For the last several years, we’ve been able to travel to Africa and Asia with short-term teams to help alleviate the suffering of some of the most destitute people on earth.

Jesus not only traveled to be with the sick, He did something else...

- Jesus took time to learn about their condition

“One man 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).

Isn’t it interesting to you that though Jesus was the Son of God and didn’t really need to “*learn*” anything, the text here says that He learned about the man’s condition? Jesus saw the man lying there and He made an effort to learn about this man’s suffering.

Jesus not only traveled to be with the sick, He interacted with them to find out what their story was. Imagine you’ve been paralyzed for 38 years and every moment of those 38 years you dreamed about being able to walk. Your zip code is down on the ground, which is the level where dust, dirt, dirty water, thrown away scraps of food, dog waste and people’s feet reside. You yearn to elevate yourself and be on a vertical position at least once in your life, but instead you resign yourself to lying on a filthy mat hoping someone will help you “jump” into a pool that you thought had healing powers. But year after year, the healing never comes.

Then, one day, a stranger comes to you and asks the question: “*Do you want to get well?*”

“What? Are you kidding me? That’s all I have wanted, my whole life!!”

Listen to the man’s words: “*I have no one to help me!*” When we take time to learn about the condition of those who are sick, often, we will find that they are in the same situation: they have no one to help them.

When I walked into a village of Pygmies in the middle of Africa in 2006, I was aware for all practical purposes, I was walking among the living dead.

The people were in such a desperate state that I wasn’t sure that they would make it through another day.

Suddenly, I was aware of how rich I was compared to them. The people were walking up to me bringing their hands to their mouths – the universal sign of hunger, and I only had hard candy and a couple of pieces of beef jerky to give them. Then I looked inside my backpack and realized all of a sudden how rich I really was. I had a digital camera, a video camera, a couple of books, some extra clothes and a little first aid kit – more earthly possession than that entire village had accumulated their entire life!

That day, I felt I completed my education on the plight of the poorest of the poor and I promised God I would do whatever I could to help alleviate the suffering of people in the world.

I have a friend by the name of Craig McCord who works among some of the most destitute people in the Philippines. In 2003, he went with me to Cambodia and while there, I felt the pulse of his heart for the poor. One night in Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, we walked half a block from our hotel and bumped into a group of homeless people - mainly children, some crippled, blind, hungry, shoeless, smelling like the dirt they carried on their tattered clothes.

We sat down to eat at a street vendor and immediately they came, one by one, asking for food. The establishment owners immediately tried to shove them away, but Craig kept inviting them to sit down with us. Finally, there was close to 20 people sitting with us. One well-dressed lady, unable to stand it anymore, looked at Craig and said sarcastically, “*Are these your family?*” And without missing a beat, he said, “*Yes, this is my family and we are having family dinner together.*” That night, the people ate royally – for a total sum of about \$10, and though we didn’t speak their language, we kept telling them with the only words we knew: “*Thank God and Jesus Christ.*” Since then, Craig

and I refer to that night as “*beggars’ banquet,*” and I feel so blessed that I was able to be there.

Well, a couple of weeks ago, I got an e-mail from my friend, Craig. Attached to the e-mail was a picture of a little boy with a cleft palate.

Being Craig, he simply said, “*Is there someone out there who can help this child get an operation in the name of Jesus?*” Well, being me, I just wanted to share this with you and make you aware of the condition of this little boy. I know nothing about how to go about doing it, but I understand it is only a 45-minute surgery that can change this boy’s life forever. So, let me ask, “*Is there anyone out there who can help this boy in the name of Jesus?*”

I am just doing my part, helping you know about the condition of one little boy or one little village in the middle of Africa. How about you? What are you doing to learn about the plight of those who are hurting? In order for us to care like Jesus, we must take the time to learn. In fact, there are a couple of displays in the hallway today where you can learn more about HIV/AIDS and the work of one of our partner ministries in the C.A.R. which is dedicated to provide water wells and other micro-enterprises to alleviate the suffering and bring the Gospel to people in that country. I invite you to stop by those displays and get some information about how you can help.

If we are going to follow in Jesus’ footsteps when it comes to caring for the sick, we must travel to be where the sick are, we must take time to learn about their condition, but there is one more thing we need to learn from Jesus.

- Jesus touched them with His miraculous power

Our text says,

“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.’ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked” (John 5:8-9).

Now granted, we don’t have the same miraculous power that Jesus had, but we do have healing powers. Jesus said if we believed we would be allowed to do greater things than what He did.

There are so many different ways you can touch someone with the healing powers of Jesus. I will use the word, “**ACT**,” to illustrate this. First,

1. Advocate on behalf of the sick (Charlene’s funeral)

The poor and suffering often have no voice. God tells us we need to speak on their behalf.

Here is how Solomon put it:

“He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; He will crush the oppressor” (Psalm 72:4).

We also have the words of a king, by the name of Lemuel, which found their way into the book of Proverbs. Notice that he gets the credit for these wise words. In an editorial comment, he is humble enough to admit that he really learned these sayings from his mother, which does not surprise me since women in general have such a compassionate heart for those who hurt,

“Speak up for the people who have no voice, for the rights of all the down-and-outers. Speak out for justice! Stand up for the poor and destitute!” (Proverbs 31:8-9, The Message).

Some of you are aware of the devastation that the HIV/AIDS pandemic is causing all over the world, but especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. The introductory video today already touched on this. I can’t picture in my mind 6,000 children dying from this horrible disease every day. It’s too much for me to comprehend this, yet that is the reality.

Of course, numbers mean nothing to us until we meet someone who is affected by this disease. I remember the first time I visited the state-run orphanage in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

I was appalled at the squalid conditions of the place. There were hundreds of children there, most of them barely surviving from hunger and disease. I thought I was done going through the place when one of the workers took me to a different wing where all the babies were.

My heart sank as I saw so many babies lying everywhere. One boy in particular was lying on a mat, listless, distant, his body only a shadow of what his three year-old frame should look like. Later, I learned he had AIDS. He looked like he was only two weeks old and I knew for certain that he would die within days. I felt sick, I couldn’t look at him. I went outside and wept. I was angry and outraged. I kept asking God, “*Why?*”

As is often the case, only later I realized God was using that baby to strengthen my resolve to help make a difference in the life of those who suffer.

Another way you can touch someone like Jesus did is to...

2. Contribute to alleviate their suffering (well drilling, World Vision catalog, one day’s wages)

When Jesus sent the disciples out to evangelize, he gave them this command:

“Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely you give” (Matthew 10:8).

It is obvious from the New Testament that Jesus gave the disciples miraculous powers which we don't possess. Yet, Jesus is still the same and He is still as powerful as He was then. He commands us to freely give because we have received freely.

It didn't take us long, after we arrived in the C.A.R. to figure out that a combination of clean water and basic latrines would save lives. By the grace of God, since 2006, our church has contributed financially to drill three wells and construct several latrines in the middle of Africa, all with funds you've provided to us.

I went back to that Pygmy village last year and it was amazing to me the difference a clean water well made. In that particular instance, our church partnered with another church in NC – they provided the well and we provided the latrines. Though the people still struggle, they now have a better chance of survival. What is more, there is now a small church in the middle of that village, all because we cared to help them.

And there is more: A well costs approximately \$16,000.00. When you do the math, based on the number of people in the villages, that amounts to only about \$10 per child in the village. \$10 gives a child clean water for life! That's an investment worth making. Our church would like to drill more wells in the C.A.R. but we need to have the financial resources to do it.

There is a final thing you can do to touch the life of a hurting person, you can...

3. Team up with others to help

Luke tells us the story of a man who was paralytic and his friends, knowing that he could not help himself, got incredibly creative and bold and decided to help him. Here is what they did:

“When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus” (Luke 5:19).

In the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa, it is often Christians who are on the frontline. In the C.A.R., the rate of infection is about 15%. That means out of 100 people, 15 are infected with the HIV virus.

One of the programs that has experienced a large degree of success in several African countries is called, *“True Love Waits,”* and it is the only abstinence-based program in the C.A.R. In the C.A.R. alone, at least 5,000 young people have made a commitment to remain pure until marriage, through the message heard at events and meetings.

Hundreds get together in TLW clubs each week, but again the challenge is finances. To do an event costs approximately \$500, and to hold TLW's training in a remote village, because of transportation, costs about \$1,000.00. Yet, this is a worthy cause and we need to invest more in this program.

Let me give you an idea for Christmas. Many families throughout the country have found this to be refreshing. Instead of buying each other gifts for Christmas. As a family, they have bought gifts through World Vision or other

organization’s catalogs. This is just a sample of one of their pages, where you can give chickens, goats, cows, etc. to help a family in an underdeveloped part of the world.

You can also find something similar by going to the Grace Brethren International Missions website. The information is printed on the bottom of your outline.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps you are wondering why I feel so passionate about this issue. Well, let me tell you: my story parallels the story of the suffering children of this world in so many ways.

I was born into a family of nine. My mother conceived 13 children but only 9 lived to adulthood. I was one of the lucky ones.

We lived in the middle of nowhere, a little, tiny village among the tributaries of the Amazon River in Northern Brazil.

We were forgotten by the world. We had no schools, no hospitals, no indoor plumbing, no clean water. Only a small hut, built on sticks, and the vast open air. The next city was two hours away by boat. If you got sick, even if you had money, chances are you would be dead before you even reached the city.

Into this Amazon version of the Wild West, suddenly arrives an American missionary by the name of Bill Burk. He comes in his little speedboat with strange news one day. He talks to my dad about a Savior who loved us and was willing to give up His life for us. My dad, a fisherman by day and a thinking man by night, embraced this Savior right away and this event changed the history of my family forever.

My friends, you would all understand if I told you that the Gospel saved me. Yes. *“The gospel saved me.”* But I am not just saying *“the Gospel saved me.”* I’m saying, *“the Gospel saved me.”* Yes, you are thinking, *“because of the Gospel you can now go to heaven and spend eternity with God there.”* That’s not bad, but you’re not there yet.

I said *“the Gospel saved me.”* “Oh yes,” you say, *“I know. Because of the Gospel you are now free from the flames of hell and poised to walk the streets of gold one day.”*

That’s pretty good, my friend, but you’re still missing it. I said, *The Gospel saved me; literally saved me -- in the here and now.* The Gospel saved me from poverty and disease, from possible death or, God forbid, from a veritable hell on earth!

You see, every month that missionary would come to our little hut on the Amazon and bring two things – the Word of God, which he shared faithfully with my father, and a little package, which he would give to my mother, containing parasite medicine. And that little pill, whose sweet taste I can still keenly feel in my mouth, cost only twenty cents, but we couldn’t afford it. That little blessed pill, *saved me and my four siblings at the time, from succumbing to diseases in a place where many children never lived to be five years old.*

So a couple of weeks ago, when I got an e-mail from Tutu, the director of Asia’s Hope in Thailand, explaining how she had to administer parasite medicine to all of our kids at Grace Place, Thailand, I could relate. When she apologized for describing how a little girl had announced proudly that *“only one worm came out of my mouth today,”* I told her not to worry – I had been there myself! When she said that one of the youngest boys keeps going back to eating mud from the ground, I told her I used to do the same!

OK, if you ever thought I was a little weird, now you know why – years of eating clay from the Amazon will do that to you!

Hopefully, you can now clearly see why it is not hard for me to open my heart to people who are suffering. When I hug children in Cambodia, Thailand, the C.A.R., or Brazil - when I see that look of desperation on their little faces, and look at their orange hair betraying signs of mal-nutrition and their bloated stomachs, I see myself. I break down and I am ready to do anything to help.

But opening your heart to those who are hurting is not only for people who came out of the Amazon. It is for everyone who claims to be a follower of Christ. If you are in tune with God's heart for people, you will also respond, the only question really is how you will respond. You've heard many ideas this morning about practical things you can do, so the only question really is...

- What will you do?