

The Great Physician

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on October 20, 2019.

And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized him, they sent around to all that region and brought to him all who were sick and implored him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well (Matthew 14:34–36).

Having crossed the Sea of Galilee, Jesus by foot and his disciples by boat, they arrive on the western shore at the little town of Gennesaret. Although a rural community, the people were not uninformed. They had heard of the miracle-working Jesus, and in fact recognize him immediately. Elated to be hosting the one who heals all diseases, they spread the word of his arrival throughout the entire region. Soon “all who were sick” were brought to Jesus and so were healed. Fully trusting in Jesus’ power to heal, they even “implored him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment,” and so they were “made well.”

Why is this brief narrative here? Perhaps it is simply a record of Jesus’ destination after crossing the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps it is another record of Jesus’ healing the sick. Perhaps it is to capture the novelty of the sick healed by the fringe of Jesus’ garment. Yet, Matthew’s careful selection of accounts and their theological significance should lead us to dig deeper.

Let us remember that upon witnessing Jesus walk on water, save Peter, and calm the storm upon the sea, the disciples worshiped Jesus, professing, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matt. 14:25-33). Let us also recall that Jesus’ miracles, whether healing the sick, casting out demons, or raising the dead, are not ends in themselves but are signs pointing to his identity and validating his word. Jesus healed the sick of the region, and as many as even touched his garment were indeed made well, truly healed, no longer sick. But given the fallen human condition, with time the people would be sick again, and they all would eventually die.

So, what is the point? Is the point of Jesus’ ministry temporary treatment? Is it merely a momentary mercy ministry? Or, is Jesus’ healing *preaching* a sermon for a greater sickness? This passage serves as a segue into a confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees, the religious elite of the day, revealing the hardness of their hearts. Those healed at Gennesaret trust Jesus willingly while others like the Scribes and Pharisees refuse to believe.

Unrelated to this passage, the Gospel of Mark records the events of a feast at the home of Levi. The guests of the feast were not the religious elite but sinners. From the outside looking in, the scribes and Pharisees were aghast, asking the disciples, “How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?” It’s a fair question: Why would a man so righteous feast with the unrighteous? But Jesus’ response provides perfect clarity. He says to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:15-17).

In Gennesaret the sick, not the well, were called throughout the region to come to Jesus. Those who are well have no need of a physician, but the Great Physician came to heal not the righteous but sinners, like you and me.

Patient Confidence

According to one of the medical doctors in our congregation, patient confidence is earned through compassion for the patient, a sincere concern for the patient's needs, and an empathy to understand. Such confidence is developed as the patient trusts in the doctor's ability and goodwill.

Upon Jesus' arrival at Gennesaret, he is recognized immediately and the sick are sought and brought. We can say that patient confidence was high. No one came for an initial consultation. They came sick, needy, desperate with full confidence in the Great Physician. While it may sound obvious, Jesus does not heal the well but the sick, and he will not save those who have no need of a savior.

The gospel is not an appeal to the healthy to make you better. It is the Word of life to the sick and dying.

Right Diagnosis

Similarly, as the scribes and Pharisees scoffed at Levi's feast, they assumed themselves to be the perfect picture of health, mind, body, and soul. Unlike the sick of Gennesaret, they did not run to Jesus or reach out and trustingly touch the fringe of his garment. They had no need to be healed, or so they thought. When Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick," the scribes and Pharisees could certainly agree. Indeed, they had no need. And when our Lord said, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:15-17), certainly the scribes and Pharisees assumed their diagnosis as "righteous."

Do you know what's worse than cancer? Undiagnosed cancer. To not know of disease, or worse to deny it, renders you untreatable for lack of a right diagnosis. The scribes and Pharisees, seemingly "righteous," could not be healed for lack of a right diagnosis. To be healed by the Great Physician begins first with a right diagnosis, understanding first that every man, woman, and child is spiritually sick. As the Apostle Paul makes crystal clear, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. ...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:10-12, 23).

In your self-righteousness you may argue that you don't feel sick, but in reality you are "eaten up" with the cancer of sin. In fact, not only are you spiritually sick, in and of yourself you have no hope of recovery. Job in his wisdom explains, "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one" (Job 14:4). Trusting in yourself, you should learn that "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9).

Such a strong dose of reality may lead you to respond in frustration, "Well, I may be sick but at least I'm not dead!" But unfortunately, apart from the life-giving healing of the Great Physician, *you are dead* in your trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). Apart from the Great Physician, you have no hope of recovery in this life or the next, because you are spiritually dead. Your only hope is to be brought, like the sick of Gennesaret, to the Great Physician, Jesus Christ.

The Great Physician

Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore,
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love, and pow'r.

Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Lost and ruined by the fall;
If you tarry till you're better,
You will never come at all.

Do you consider yourself to be the perfect picture of health spiritually without need of the Great Physician? Do you consider yourself too healthy to bother the Great Physician, too righteous to be healed? Listen closely to our Lord's caution: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

Effective Treatment

Well over a decade ago a small sore in my nose inflamed to an aggressive infection that spread overnight from my nose to the side of my face. By the time my doctor sent me to the hospital the concern was that the infection was moving quickly to my brain. To complicate matters, the infection was likely an antibiotic-resistant staph infection, known as MRSA. After the doctor explained that there are few drugs that treat MRSA, they started an immediate intravenous-treatment of antibiotics. The problem was that I was allergic to the antibiotic and almost immediately my entire body was covered in hives as the drug ran through my veins. This was *not* effective treatment.

I'm thankful to say that another drug was available, which was highly effective, and I left the hospital shortly thereafter. (Whether the infection impacted my brain, I leave to your discernment!). I am told, and also experienced, that the key to effective treatment is not only a right diagnosis but also a knowledge of the patient. Neither the doctor nor I knew of my allergy and so I unknowingly received ineffective treatment. I don't fault the doctor, but she certainly gained knowledge of her patient quickly.

This of course is *not* the case with our heavenly Father. The psalmist reminds us that "he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103:14). As the sick were brought to Jesus on that western shore of the Sea of Galilee, he was not ignorant of their condition. Let us not read of the healing by "the fringe of his garment" and assume some form of impersonal, mechanistic medicine. In our Lord's sovereign mercy the humble are healed by the simple faith of a touch, for he knows us unlike any other person.

David confessed,

LORD, Thou hast searched me;
Thou hast known
My rising and my sitting down;
And from afar Thou knowest well

The Great Physician

The very thoughts that in
me dwell.

Thou knowest all the ways I plan,
My path and lying down
dost scan;
For in my tongue no word can be,
But, lo, O LORD, 'tis known
To Thee
(Psalm 139:1-4).

Because our Lord knows us so well, he knows that we are fallen in our sin, and without hope apart from his sovereign mercy, effective treatment for sinners like you and me.

He who healed the sick, he who raised the dead, “himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1Peter 2:24). Therefore, the gospel is the only effective treatment for sinners. By God’s grace alone through faith in Christ alone we, even when we were dead in our trespasses, were made alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:5).

Having been brought to life by our Great Physician, he not only provides effective treatment for our sin he also enables us by his indwelling Spirit to live for him. Think of your sanctification as God’s wellness plan for your soul, for “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

The Christian life then is a life lived out in full confidence in our Great Physician. Though you may not always feel healthy and whole, though you may see evidence of the disease of sin, trust in the Keeper and Perfecter of your soul. For the Great Physician knows you better than yourself, loves you more than anyone else, and “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).