

## The Ministry of Jesus to People with Disabilities

By Sharon Post

When Jesus lived here on earth, He showed compassion to those who needed it most. He answered every call from a person condemned by affliction to beg on the side of the road, every plea from a distraught parent of a child with a disability, and every request from a loving caretaker. Contrary to Jewish tradition, Jesus touched every person with an infirmity that came to Him for help. Sometimes Jesus honored the faith of the person who needed healing. Sometimes He honored the faith of family or friends requesting healing. Other times He healed people simply because their obvious need moved Him to compassion. However, to see Jesus' relationship to people with disabilities only as a healer of their physical bodies creates a great void in understanding His true mission. Jesus definitely ministered to people with disabilities by healing their bodies, but more importantly, He ministered to the person inside the body. Indeed, Jesus' love and acceptance of people with disabilities during His time on earth provides imperative lessons for ministry that reach into eternity.

At the time Jesus began His ministry, Jewish people generally believed that God was punishing the person with a disability for their own sin or for the sin of their forefathers. Therefore, the person with a disability lived as a social outcast and was condemned to beg in order to make a living. In the absence of wheelchairs, the person unable to walk had to crawl, [be carried around by others], or stay indoors until he died (Byzek, p.2). Jesus healed people with disabilities because he had compassion for their physical struggles, but He also healed them "so they would be viewed as whole by their fellow countrymen and their oppression would lessen" (Byzek, p.3). However, the healing of the paralytic man as recorded in Mark 2:1-12 shows that a person did not need to be physically "whole" in order to qualify for forgiveness of sins, for Jesus forgave the man of his sins before He healed him of his paralysis. Josie Byzek, a freelance writer with a disability, states in her article, "Jesus and the Paralytic, the Blind and the Lame: A Sermon," "Jesus saw the man as worthy and deserving of God's love just as every other—non-disabled—person in the room. Not any more or any less 'whole'. If Jesus did not accept the man for who he was, equal to all other people in the room, then He would have healed the man first and forgiven his sins second" (p.3). Jesus provided perfect proof that a person with a disability is not less deserving of forgiveness than a person without a disability. In fact, Jesus continually showed compassion and gave His time to help the impaired with a listening ear, a kind word, and a healing touch, which also abundantly blessed many of their families.

Moreover, Jesus dispelled the general belief that disability sprang from individual or parental sin when He answered the disciples' question about who sinned that a man would be born blind, the man or his parents. He told them that neither the man nor his parents sinned, but the man was born blind so that the "work of God might be

displayed in his life" (Jn. 9:3, NIV). In his article, "People with Disabilities in the Bible: Who are they and What Can We Learn from them?" Arne Fritzon claims that Jesus' answer to His disciples "should have prevented any interpretation that the Bible teaches us that disabilities is a punishment from God for sins. Yet we meet such interpretations among Christians all over the world" (p.1). Certainly, the Pharisees struggled with this new concept perpetuated by Jesus in His ministry. In fact, when the newly healed man was brought to the Pharisees in the Temple (probably the first time he had ever been there), they refused to accept his healing as a holy thing and threw him out of the Temple. They still saw him as disabled and unworthy of coming into the Temple courts. When Jesus heard about it, however, he found the man he healed, revealed to him his true reason for ministry, and brought him into a relationship with himself, the Son of God.

Louise Gosbell eloquently summarizes the purpose behind the miracles of Jesus in her compelling article "Disability and the Miracles of Jesus." Gosbell states that while some people believe that all Christians should have a healing ministry like Jesus did, others believe that this kind of healing power belonged only to Jesus so He could prove He was the Messiah. "Either way, what is most often overlooked in the miracle accounts of Jesus is that He was interacting with people in a way that was unique. These are *real* stories of *real* people who had a *real* experience of Jesus" (Gosbell, p.1). Restoration of relationships is indeed the core of the ministry of Jesus, and in the process of restoration, Jesus embraced those in need.

In his sermon titled "People with Disabilities Dine with Jesus," Rev. Jim Vander Laan presents Jesus' embrace of people with disabilities. He told his congregation how Jesus likened His healing the man with dropsy on the Sabbath to someone pulling his son or ox from a well on the Sabbath to prevent a drowning (Luke 14:1-6) and thus acknowledged that the imperative need of the man with dropsy was of utmost importance. Furthermore, says Vander Laan, "God expects them [the Pharisees], and us, to help such a person in need (p.2). Vander Laan continues to explain that Jesus includes the social outcasts, the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind in the invitation to the Great Banquet that Jesus describes in His parable, to the Sabbath Dinner given by the Pharisees, and especially to the Kingdom Feast after the resurrection of the dead (Luke 14:12-23). Jesus, he points out, had the audacity to tell the Pharisees that they invited guests from the wrong guest list to their Sabbath dinner, because they did not invite the poor, the lame, and the blind who could not repay them for their kindness. Jesus rattled all their long-held beliefs, because he was "determined to show great compassion to marginal and outcast people" (Vander Laan, p.3).

Interestingly, Vander Laan reveals that the host in Jesus' parable who invited the outcasts to the banquet stands in contrast to Christ, for this host made the outcasts his second choice guests. Jesus, on the other hand, clearly stated to the Pharisees that they were to include people with disabilities on their original guest list. Some may argue that the replacement guests in the parable represent Gentile converts and not real people with disabilities. However, Vander Laan counters that argument

by stating that the man with dropsy, healed in front of all the dinner guests, was “a real man, and Jesus means real people with disabilities when he tells his host to invite ‘the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind’” (p.4).

Jesus definitely stirred the social order of his culture. He touched the unclean lepers, touched Jairus’ dead daughter, and he touched the demon-possessed men of the Gadarenes that no one else could touch. Jesus aligned himself with the people out of touch and marginalized by society. When others told beggars with disabilities to be quiet and leave Jesus alone, he called them to himself. With love and compassion, Jesus took the man who was blind and begging for mercy by the hand and led him out of town to heal him (Mark 8:22-25). All through the gospels, Jesus interacted one-on-one with the people who were sick, hurting, and disabled. He gave them His attention and His time. Though Jesus did teach in the synagogue and mingled some with the educated and elite, He spent more of his time out in the open and at the houses of the down-and-out.

Although Jesus healed the body that did not perform perfectly, His piercing eyes looked inside the flawed body to the person’s soul. Gosbell explains that Jesus’ healing of people with disabilities, and spending so much time with those rejected by society showed how much He valued them. She states that his interaction with the sick and impaired was more important than the obvious miracle that took place, for He restored the rejected back to their families and back into the religious life of the community. Gosbell brings out the greater importance behind the miracles—restoration of a relationship to the heavenly Father through the individual’s encounter with Jesus (p.2). Jesus embraced people with disabilities and they were changed inside and out.

Although Jesus’ ministry typically involves the last three years of his life, His ministry really began when He chose to come to earth as a helpless baby. During the three years of ministry that led to His death, He chose to give himself in love and compassion to people with disabilities, sickness, and disease. Then to provide complete restoration to the Father, Jesus chose to die by crucifixion, a horrendous method of torture that disabled Him upon a cross. Gosbell proclaims, “Jesus invites all people, regardless of their physical ability, to be in relationship with Him [his true mission] and to become a part of the Body of Christ—a place of diverse ability and unconditional acceptance. The results of the miracles are temporary but spiritual restoration is eternal” (p.2).

In the *Upper Room Daily Devotional*, Sharlene McGowan asks an important question about our part in the ministry of Jesus today: “Do we touch those who are ill and those who are social outcasts and bring them into our faith community? Or (perhaps the bigger question) do we allow them to touch us?”

## References

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