

Faith & Healing

Bible Study

By Rev. Jason Forbes



1. What have you heard about faith and healing, and what implications does this have?

2. What do you think life would have been like for people with disabilities in Jesus' day? How would it have been different than today?

Read Mark 2:1-12

3. A house is crowded with people who want to hear Jesus preach (v. 2). Yet, the scribes (part of the religious establishment) still managed to find a place to sit (v. 6), while a man with paralysis needed to be lowered through a hole in the roof (v. 4). What does this suggest about the way people with disabilities were viewed?

4. Jesus declares that the man's sins are forgiven (v. 5). What implications does this have for a person's relationship with God?

5. When Jesus made this declaration, was the man disabled or able-bodied? What does this imply for the relationship between faith and disability?

6. How did the scribes respond, and why do you think they responded this way (v. 7)?

7. Why does Jesus heal this man (v. 10 and 11)? How do you think this changed the man's life (compare your answers to question 2)?

8. While we may ask for healing for a person with a disability, it may not always happen. In such cases, how might we encourage the work of Jesus in the person's life in other ways?

Understanding Faith and Healing in the Context of Disability

Rev. Jason Forbes

I spotted this statement shared by "The Autistic Pastor" (Lamar Hardwick) on his Facebook page that was a response to his latest book, "Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion." The statement reads, "*Christ healed almost everybody who had a disability except those who didn't believe. If the church doesn't have elders who are anointed to heal, that church is incomplete.*"



Christ healed almost everybody who had a disability except those who didn't believe. If the church doesn't have elders who are anointed to heal, that church is incomplete."

It begs belief that some in the church persist in thinking that the presence of disability is evidence of a lack of faith. With so much material readily available to those in the Western church on the subject of disability and theology, along with mountains of biblical expositions, it's difficult to excuse such careless reading of Scripture. Nonetheless, the idea that disability is evidence of a lack of faith continues to pop up in the modern Western Church. So, we need to continue this discussion. Here, I'd like to point out three problems with statements such as this.

Firstly, this statement, along with many other statements about disability, assumes that the concept of disability is concrete. It is not. Disability is a fluid concept that changes between time and place. What is considered a disability, and the perception and significance of that disability is dependent on the culture. The culture in the time and place of Jesus' earthly ministry perceived a correlation between a person's physical condition and their spiritual condition. That is to say, if a person was physically sick, or physically disabled, they were considered as being spiritually sick or spiritually disabled, and therefore could not be reconciled to God. To suggest otherwise was scandalous.

It may be difficult for us to appreciate how people could have thought this way. However, there is a parallel in Western culture in the not too distant past. Up until the 1970s, it was assumed by a section of the medical profession that those born with cerebral palsy also had a profound intellectual disability (referred to as mental retardation at the time) despite the lack of empirical evidence. To suggest that a person could have cerebral palsy and be intelligent was scandalous. In 1979, Anne McDonald (born in 1961 with cerebral palsy) had to take legal action in the Supreme Court of Victoria essentially to have her intelligence recognised and leave the hospital where she resided against her will.¹

¹ Rosemary Crossley and Anne McDonald, *Annie's Coming Out*, 3rd edition (DEAL books, 2010).

This presumptive attitude towards those with cerebral palsy concerning their intelligence parallels the presumptive attitudes towards those who were sick and disabled in the culture of Jesus' day by religious authorities - the educated class. This can be seen in Jesus healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1–12) - a person considered unable to be reconciled to God. The scribes (part of the religious authority) were scandalised by Jesus' actions. However, the scandal was not that Jesus enabled the paralytic to walk. Rather, the scandal was drawn from the fact that Jesus declares the paralytic's sin forgiven (v. 6). What this means is, Jesus is declaring the paralytic to be reconciled with God before he heals him (v. 11). In doing so, Jesus separates a person's physical condition from their spiritual condition and denies any correlation. This is why Jesus' words are considered as blasphemy (v. 7). Not only does Jesus assume the position of God in forgiving the man's sin, but the thought that a paralytic could be reconciled to God was an anathema to the religious authorities.

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Clearly, there is a different concept of disability in the culture of Jesus' day. Simply taking modern Western concepts of disability and imposing them onto the biblical text is inappropriate. While there may be some overlap between the two concepts of disability according to their prospective cultures, ignoring the differences risks misreading the biblical text. This can have a significant negative impact in the way people with disabilities are perceived and received in the church, as expressed in this statement.

The second problem is that the statement assumes that faith is required for healing. Without a doubt, there are instances in the gospels where faith explicitly proceeds healing (Matt 9:22 [// Mark 5:34; Luke 8:48]; Mark 10:52 [// Luke 18:42]). However, these instances do not set a rule. There are other instances where the presence of faith is not made explicit and can be assumed to be absent.

Jesus healed another paralysed man who apparently did not respond in faith (John 5:8–9). Jesus caught up with the man afterwards and warned him not to sin any more (v. 14). This sin here, presumably, is the denial of Jesus. The necessity of Jesus' warning is made apparent by the man's response in reporting Jesus to the authorities which resulted in persecution for Jesus (vv. 15–16). This is in contrast to the healing of the blind man who grows in faith as he testifies to the origin of Jesus and eventually worships him (9:38).

Other instances of healing were responded to with acts of disobedience. Jesus healed a man with leprosy. Having leprosy meant that the person could not participate in the community (Mark 1:41–42). Jesus instructed the man to observe the tradition according to Old Testament law (v. 44). Such action would have legitimised the man's re-entry into the community. Instead, the man announced what Jesus had done for him which made it difficult for Jesus to continue his ministry (v. 45).

On another occasion, Jesus healed ten men with leprosy (Luke 17:14). Yet, only one of them expressed praise and thanksgiving towards Jesus. A Samaritan no less - someone considered to be outside of the community of God (v. 17). Of this one man, Jesus declares him to be not only cleansed, but saved (v. 19. Cf. v. 14)!² This would suggest that this one man had faith while the other nine did not. Even if it was to be argued that faith preceded the healing of the ten men, it still needs to be acknowledged that the faith of the one was of a different quality than the other nine. This would suggest that neither is the quality of faith a consideration for the occurrence of healing.

Clearly, there are instances in the gospels where, at the very least, faith did not explicitly proceed healing, and it is probable that faith was even absent. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that faith is required for healing. Further, neither can it be assumed that the absence of healing indicates an absence of faith.

The third problem is the claim that the lack of giftedness, specifically that of healing, is a sign that the church is incomplete. This is a very similar error to the church in Corinth. Spiritual giftedness was seen as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and a sign that they had entered a higher realm of being. This view was so prominent, those who lacked spiritual giftedness were seen as dispensable. Paul writes to correct this view and argues that such believers are indispensable (1 Cor 12:22). Instead, what makes a church incomplete is not the absence of spiritual giftedness, but the absence of love (13:1-3). A love that does not insist on its own way (v. 5). A love that doesn't insist that cultural norms must be conform to. Love that does not place expectations on people, and judges them when they fall short. Instead, love that bears all things. The church is complete when it loves like this.

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When we read instances of healing in the Bible, we need to take care not to impose our assumptions onto the text. Jesus was not interested in restoring people's bodily function, as we might be today. Jesus was interested in restoring people's spiritual function as they related to God, their community, and creation. In the culture of the day, this was most clearly expressed in restoring the body's functionality. Our modern culture does not make the same correlation. Our modern culture sees the body's functionality as key in expressing self-determinism, which is one of our cultural tenants. It is not the concern of Jesus. If we, as the modern Western Church, are going to represent Jesus, we won't obsess over bodily function as an expression of self-determination according to our cultural values. Instead, we will be concerned for people's relationships with God, other people, and creation. For in this is true and lasting healing.

² The Greek verb σωζω (sōzō) has connotations of salvation as well as healing.