

Praying Unselfishly for Myself and Those about Whom I Care

Having avoided selfishness and self-centeredness in prayer, this question must now be answered: Is all prayer regarding me and my needs selfish? Absolutely not. Each of us knows most of the time whether or not our desires are real needs or pure wants. Within want and need is the distinction between unselfish and selfish prayers. Are we praying for what we really need to “get by” (our daily bread)? Or are we trying to use prayer as a means of achieving the American dream, asking God to give us luxury automobiles, big bonuses at work, and citizenship in a country with absolute military might?

Desiring health for our loved ones and ourselves is not selfish in the least, and we should certainly pray without ceasing in thanking God for pulling us (individually and communally) consistently toward health. This is what God does whether or not we ask! When we are unhealthy and needing to seek various means for having our health restored, then we can thank God for God’s willingness to direct us as we listen anew.

Using Jesus as our guide, we notice two very telling interactions that he had with persons who were ill.

First, Jesus affirmed those who sought out a means to be made whole. He spent most of his time helping people find physical, emotional, and mental wholeness. Recall the unnamed woman with the “issue of blood,” as the ancient storytellers put it. “She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse” (Mark 5:26).

Health practitioners and waiting rooms had obvious-

Reflections

Felt Needs

The science of marketing is based on the study of “felt needs.”

1. Is there a difference between needing something and wanting something?
2. Is it okay to want something as long as you don’t expect God to give it to you?

Teaching Tips

Healing

Mark 5:26 summarizes the last few years in the life of someone you know. Use this statement and your reflections to give some consideration to the widespread need for healing in our world.

Encourage the group to share a few stories on this subject.

ly exhausted this woman! She had an image of Jesus that led her to believe that if she could make minimal physical contact with him, healing would flow into her weary body. She would not have to bother Jesus with an appointment or a health history. If she could just squeeze through the crowd (which was difficult given her physical weakness from persistent blood loss), and as much as brush up against the faith healer, she was convinced that the bleeding would stop.

The only thing that surprised the woman who turned out to be more persistent than her bleeding was that Jesus did realize that his powers had been tapped. "Who touched me?" he asked (Mark 5:32).

The woman, who now felt physically well for the first time in years, suddenly became paralyzed with fear. She managed to tell Jesus her story and, much to her surprise, Jesus was delighted. "Daughter," he said with jubilation, "your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease" (Mark 5:34).

Second, Jesus actually asked someone before pointing him toward health if he, in fact, wanted to be well. If congregations and pastors assume that everyone who is ill wants to be well, they are mistaken.

There is a powerful turn in the story that opens John 5. Jesus encounters a man who, from all indications, wants to be well more than anybody in the world wanted to be well. He had thirty-eight years of effort to prove it. And yet amazingly, before offering some healing options, Jesus asks him a question that makes Jesus seem a little unfocussed at best: "Do you want to be made well?" (John 5:6b). There is no healing, even if all the right prayers are uttered, if the person who is ill lacks the desire to be well. Wellness is not a condition that God forces upon any of us.

A very much sought after clinical psychologist left her lucrative private practice a few years ago and became a public school psychologist. I was acquainted with her when she became part of the instructional team for one of my sons, who was struggling with learning differences. She became his heroine. As I knew her better, I asked her why she had made the move from a higher to lower income. Her answer made me thankful:

Reflections

Twice Healed?

Why did Jesus say what he said at the end of 5:34 when, according to verse 29, the woman was already cured?

See Mary Ann Tolbert's thoughts on the matter in her commentary on the two verses, *NISB*, 1817.

Study Bible

According to Gail R. O'Day, the length of the man's illness, thirty-eight years, indicated its "seeming permanence," *NISB*, 1916.

Reflections

Checkup

1. Are we prayerfully concerned about our own health most of the time, or only when we are ill?
2. Have we trained ourselves not to care—and, therefore, not to pray—about the plight of the millions who are dying from starvation and disease?

“Because I wanted to work with people who really wanted to make productive changes in their lives.”

Again, there is nothing selfish about wanting to be well, and wanting health and wholeness for our loved ones and for persons anonymous to us whom we know. It is the Christian's desire, even obligation, to pray for those who suffer, such as the huge percentage of persons on the African continent infected with the HIV virus.

One of the clearest of all signs that our prayers are unselfish is that they focus on others who have needs, not just ourselves or those close to us. A desire for our personal health is the most natural thing in the world; no one could conceive of such a concern as an indication of self-centeredness. As a matter of fact, in this particular area, it is often a selfish thing not to be concerned about optimum health.

Conclusion: A Pastor's Response

One's theology of providence becomes very critical at the juncture of healing and wholeness. This is true whether you are the patient, the person offering the prayer, or both. Personally, I cannot accept the idea that God wills or allows anyone's illness or suffering. Thus, I am careful to avoid the impression that a prayer addressing the matter of restored health is a prayer that asks God to undo what God has readily willed.

As a pastor, I have radically changed my prayer utterances with a parishioner who is in some kind of a health crisis—from surgery that is about to be performed to news of a potentially irreversible illness. I have moved away entirely from prayers that say such things as:

- ◆ “God, I pray that you would heal Sister Laura.”
- ◆ “God, if it be your will, let Brother Sam be whole again.”

What are the theological presuppositions of these two prayers? I note three: a) God is powerful and can heal the sick; b) If I ask properly and effectively, God might do some healing; and c) God might as easily, however (and for unknowable reasons), will the continuation of the disease and ultimately death. Any pastor should

have problems with “b” and “c” because either I (b) or God (c) would bear the blame for a significant part of human suffering.

Instead, I pray as I hold the hand of someone who is anxious or suffering, saying:

- ◆ “Gracious God, in a world where so many forces work against our health and well-being, we are grateful beyond words that you, without fail, work for our wholeness.”
- ◆ “God of strength and encouragement, we rest in the reality that you go with our loved one into this surgery and that your desire is for full restoration.”
- ◆ “God of love and compassion, we know that you want for all of your children the abundant life and lives lived to their fullest temporal extent. Therefore, if there are pathways for healing about which our friend does not know, we seek your leadership in finding those sources.”