

Heal the Sick

Our aim in part five is to study the main commands of Jesus to his followers. It is tempting to try to grade these in importance, on the basis of how much stress Jesus laid on each. Love seems to be near the top of the list, if not at the top. Next most evident seems to be the five-fold instruction, "As you go, preach this message: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons (Matt 10:7-8)."

We saw that love must not be a matter of words or talk; it needs to be genuine, and show itself in action (1 John 3:18). Jesus seems to have considered these activities were the actions of love. There was a message of good news to be heard and believed, and a powerful release to be experienced; to introduce people to the new freedom they would enjoy was a loving action. Jesus explained at the start that he would be doing these things because of Isaiah 61:1-2, the passage he chose to read and comment on in his home synagogue (Luke 4:18-19).

Up until recently, the Church has had a poor record on healing the sick by the methods Jesus used. The advent of modern medicine has been welcomed, and Christian missions have founded many hospitals all over the world. This has been excellent. However, there has been something of a blind spot with regard to laying on hands.

I was struck recently on re-reading the life of Hudson Taylor, missionary to inland China, how on one occasion in 1855 he was summoned to visit a sick person miles from habitation. When he arrived, he diagnosed the illness, and said that the person needed to be taken to hospital in Shanghai, far down-stream. For all his faith and intimate knowledge of God, it appears not to have occurred to him to lay on hands.

Some would argue that Hudson Taylor was right to avoid laying on hands. In a book entitled *The Healing Epidemic*, Peter Masters declares that it is not good to attempt to heal the sick by the laying on of hands today. He wonders whether those who succeed in it may be empowered by occultic means (published by the Wakeman Trust).

This is similar to the charge which was leveled at Jesus himself, with regard to casting out evil spirits (Luke 11:15). His reply was that it was by the finger of God that he cast out demons (v20). We will discuss this phrase in the next chapter.

At the outset, we need to be sure that the only power we attempt to harness in healing and deliverance is the power of the Holy Spirit. So-called good spirits, or natural powers, or psychic skills and the like, are not to be entertained. Jesus made no use whatever of such things; neither should we. The reason is not far to seek; God has said he will not give his glory to another (Isa 42:8), and in healing the sick, all the glory is to go to God, and none to man, or to spiritual forces. As Paul put it, "whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31)."

Having said that, however, anyone who urges Christians not to heal the sick today needs to be aware of the importance of what he is saying. Is such a person the Messiah? He would be horrified at the suggestion. Is Jesus the Messiah? He would say, yes. Who then has the authority to alter what the Messiah has said? In my opinion, only someone of the same stature as the Messiah himself can change an instruction given by Jesus. And given the frequency with which Jesus encouraged his followers to heal the sick, both by example, and by command, it would seem strange that this instruction was going to be changed later on, after Jesus had returned to his Father.

If there was going to be a change from the methods and example Jesus used, why was no advance warning given (Amos 3:7)? It seems, on the contrary, that Scripture goes to some lengths to underline that the way Jesus taught was not to be changed. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever (Heb 13:8)." Jesus himself said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away (Matt 24:35)." Jesus warned his followers that many false Messiahs would come and lead people astray (Matt 24:5). It is a grim thought that Christians today could mislead others by well-meaning false teaching, without realising it.

Our understanding is that being a Christian means following the way Jesus showed, so we will discuss how to heal people in the way he did. This is not to downgrade medicine. But it is to say

that the church is sent to do a job in the same way that Jesus was sent (John 20:21), which includes his programme of healing the sick, deliverance, and so forth.

We can understand people being concerned about possibly straying into occultic realms in this area. I was cautious about this myself, to begin with. Perhaps a good place to start is to copy Jesus absolutely, to gain confidence. One of the earliest people he healed was Peter's mother-in-law. She had a fever, and Jesus rebuked it (Luke 4:39).

Believers today can do exactly the same. No laying on of hands is necessary for a rebuke. Something like, "I rebuke this fever in the name of Jesus", seems right. When saying the words, we should bear in mind what we learnt about authority in chapter one.

I remember meeting a lady in a house group I belonged to, some years ago. This was before I grasped that we could pray for the sick today like Jesus did. She used to foster unwanted babies one after another, in addition to raising her own children. She said that whenever one of her large family caught a cold, she would rebuke the virus firmly, and it would not spread round everyone, but go. When I heard this, I thought she must be crazy. It seemed very odd to me.

When this took place, I had been a believer for fifteen years. Looking back on our conversation now, her attitude strikes me as thoroughly scriptural. In fact, I find it hard to imagine how anyone might come closer to copying Jesus than in doing what she did.

So we might conclude that we can all go round rebuking fevers. However, we are not all to be uniform in what we do. I remember once, when I caught a cold, that I asked God how I should pray about it. The thought came, "Patience and faith". I took this to mean, on one level, "Trust me patiently and this will go in due course", and on another, "Live by Hebrews 6:12", since the words appear there; "...Imitate those who through faith and patience are inheriting the promises". So I took it that I was to put up with the cold until it had run its course, and that the Lord wanted to draw Hebrews 6:12 to my attention.

We can see that the two situations are not similar, since in my case, a cold was no threat, but in the lady's case, with vulnerable babies and a growing family in the home, a cold going round, perhaps several times over a winter, would have been most unwelcome.

This insight that different cases are not always alike brings us to an important verse. Jesus once said that with regard to healing, he only ever did what he saw the Father doing, "because whatever the Father does, the son also does" (John 5:19). The occasion was at the pool of Bethesda. This was surrounded by disabled people (v3), but Jesus had only healed one of them. Nobody asked him why the other ones were left ill. However, his statement contains part of the answer. Jesus' healing ministry was so successful because he was in such close touch with his Father that the Holy Spirit was at work in everything he did. Later on, the first believers would have a similar degree of success for the same reason (Acts 5:16 follows 4:31 & 5:11).

We may think that Jesus had an unfair advantage over us because as Son of God, he could work miracles that we cannot. But this is to miss the point. Jesus was indeed God, but on coming to earth, he emptied himself (Phil 2:6-7). This laying aside appears to have included his capacity to act with divine power, since in our verse in John, he says that he cannot do anything by himself (John 5:19). In other words, he did not have any advantage over us. He only did mighty works after being filled with the Holy Spirit at baptism. Indeed, what was happening

when Jesus received the Holy Spirit, if he had not laid aside something of his special standing as Son of God?

Scripture tells us that Jesus was totally dependent on his Father, and so are believers today. He even encouraged his followers to expect to do greater miracles than he had done, because he was going to the Father (John 14:12). Jesus loved it when his followers healed the sick then (Luke 10:21 in context), and he is promoting the same cause now in heaven when his followers do it today (John 14:13-14). So Christians don't need to feel daunted by Jesus' success, nor to feel that they have no power. Believers today have access to the same Father through the Holy Spirit that Jesus did.

So far, we have argued for all Christians copying Jesus by healing the sick. At this point, some might want to object that Paul wrote that not all have gifts of healing (1 Cor 12:30). This suggests

that while some will have a ministry of healing, others will not. They may major on something else. Therefore, it is a mistake to encourage every believer to get involved in healing the sick.

I found these thoughts hard to handle myself, as to begin with, when I laid on hands, although no-one seemed to get any worse, they did not get any better as I had hoped. So I had actually decided that I did not have a gift of healing, and had all but given up, when a friend pointed out that the passage in 1 Corinthians 12 also said that not all have gifts of teaching. I could readily agree with this, having been a school teacher myself, and having sat under some poor teachers in my own school days. However, while only few may be gifted teachers, anyone can have a go at teaching. You don't need to be a gifted teacher to show someone how to use a screwdriver, for example - almost anyone could manage to teach that skill.

So I realised that I did not need to have gifts in healing before attempting to heal the sick. I could keep trying! I developed a patter to say to people, along the lines that I believed in trying to heal the sick like Jesus did, and that to my knowledge no-one had got any worse after my ministrations to date, and that I would simply invite the Holy Spirit to come as I laid on hands, etc.

My estimate is that the first twenty-five people I prayed for in this way showed no improvement, but that after that, quite a number, if not most, made unexpected progress after the prayer. Some picked up in a remarkable way, but for most, prayer was later seen to have come at the turning point. I also found that my success-rate improved when I had lost my initial excitement at this new development.

It is worth reflecting further on the phrase 'gifts of teaching'. One of the teachers I had at school was renowned as being an excellent teacher. I only had one lesson from him, on an occasion when our own teacher was away. Over twenty-five years later, I can still remember some aspects of that particular lesson. It was so interesting that I was completely absorbed by it, and I couldn't believe it when the bell went at the end.

With thought, I now realise that man was not a gifted teacher when he first walked into a classroom. He may have developed quickly, but he had to start where everyone starts - as a beginner. And no doubt, he worked hard and studied how to improve his skills on his way to becoming such a successful teacher. Further, I don't suppose his outstanding gift discouraged other people from becoming teachers.

This discussion of teachers can be seen as parallel to those with gifts of healing. A Christian magazine once described 'signs and wonders ministry' as being a high wire act, something which many would applaud, but which few would dream of attempting to copy. I believe such thinking is unhelpful. It is better for us all to see ourselves as able to have a go in any and every spiritual arena that Jesus called for, including healing. We will only discover if we are gifted after many attempts.

If this argument is accepted, then how can we proceed? We suggested earlier that we could start by mimicking Jesus, which is presumably what the first disciples did. However, if we only copy Jesus slavishly, we will soon find ourselves in trouble.

Suppose we encounter a deaf person. As we scour the gospels, we find that on one occasion, Jesus put his fingers into a deaf man's ears, spat and touched his tongue, looked up to heaven and gave a deep sigh, and said Ephphatha, which means be opened (Mark 7:32-35). However, two chapters later, a deaf and dumb boy, who also had problems with convulsions, was cured by being delivered of a "deaf and mute spirit (Mark 9:25)." Clearly discernment was needed; whereas the problem was the result of an evil spirit in the second instance, it was not in the first.

We realise that we are not going to get very far without discernment of the spiritual state of the person being prayed for. I remember one evening praying for a teenager with a most painful foot. Several of us laid on hands with no result - the pain got worse and worse. An hour later, when we had the courage to try again, one of the group thought of Genesis 3:15, where God says to the serpent, "He (man) will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." He quoted it. Then another said, "Yes, and this is an evil spirit, and I command

you to leave in the name of Jesus." The result was dramatic - instantaneously the foot jerked up in the air, as if someone had yanked it, and the teenager said, "Oh that's better", and had no further trouble.

So we do better to copy Jesus at a deeper level. Rather than cloning his actions, let us take on his foundational aims and beliefs, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. He told us that the Father likes nothing better than to give us the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13 in context). Then we will have something to offer people.

It would be nice to think that everyone we pray for will improve. However, in practice, there are several obstacles to healing that I have encountered. The first is that our culture has not seen much Gospel-type prayer for the sick. We have an inheritance of unbelief when it comes to the miraculous. I was once talking to an occasional church member, who confided that her son-in-law had a brain tumour that the medics could not help, and that the hospital had sent him home to die. I expressed sorrow, and then gently explained that I believed in praying for people like Jesus did in the Gospels, and if the family would like, I would be pleased to come and do what I could. The lady appeared not to have heard, and changed the subject.

I did not press it - I don't believe in trying to overcome other people's wills. I have learned from experience that many people find this ministry hard to accept. It challenges too many of the norms of our culture.

A second discouragement comes from people's responses. They seldom get in touch afterwards. Personally, I hesitate to ask them how they are, as no one should be pressured into saying there has been an improvement when there has not been. I prefer to let people make their own response. Few do, and I used to conclude that little had happened. However, Jesus once healed ten lepers, and only one returned to give thanks, so it seems better not to expect much feedback, but just go quietly on praying where one can.

A third discouragement comes from people's own negative evaluation. I once visited an 80 year old lady in hospital who seemed to be near death; there was no diagnosis, but she had great discomfort which prevented her sleeping properly, and was wearing her out. She accepted prayer when I offered. As we were silent, I found myself imagining an emerald coloured piece of clover. I recalled the gates of the new Jerusalem, and thumbed up Revelation 21. Yes, emerald came in verse 19. Then my eye fell on verse 4, which promised an end to death, crying and pain. I told her my entire thought process, and then quietly commanded an end to death, crying and pain for her, trusting that this verse had been given by God as being the right one for this occasion.

The lady was most puzzled by what I had said. Had this happened more recently, I might simply have said that Revelation 21:4 had come to mind, and missed out the rest, unless it was in a teaching situation, where others could learn. Some people might find this easier to take.

The lady was discharged from hospital a little later, and I used to visit her at home. On every visit, she always said how dreadful things were, and I was discouraged. My prayer appeared to have failed.

She never went back into hospital; two years later, she died at home. Afterwards, I met a friend of hers who said that all through her life she had always complained about things. This helped me. I realised that in fact, after the prayer, she had an extra spell of life in reasonable comfort at home, with her husband. So the prayer was more of a success than I had thought. I have learned not to agonise too much over whether someone is 'healed' or not. I prefer simply to bless them, invite the Holy Spirit to be present, flow with the promptings that come, and if there is improvement, that is good.

Sometimes the objection is raised as to why people are not healed instantaneously, as appears to have happened when Jesus prayed. I recall reading Francis McNutt's comment on this, that Jesus was a perfect channel of the Father's love, and the power flowed without hindrance. We, at best, are blocked channels, and what he achieved in seconds may take us twenty minutes, or may require repeated attempts. So personally, I am quite happy to pray for someone on a number of occasions, and take plenty of time over it.

I once read in a Christian magazine of a woman in America, who was unable to have a child, and had prayer for this condition more than thirty times. Finally a prophetic word that she would have a child was given to her at a meeting, and she was holding her baby within the year (2 Kings 4:14-17). So let's not be discouraged by apparent failure.

However, there are other reasons in the Bible why healing may not take place, such as stinginess towards the poor (Ps 41:1-3; cf Mal 3:7-12), or wrong attitudes (James 1:2-8). In Corinth, sickness and even death in the church was a result of wrong attitudes towards the Lord's body (1 Cor 11:32). It would be a mistake to limit our understanding of this phrase to the bread and wine, which is the immediate context, as in the following chapter, the body stands for all the believers (12:12-27). So it seems that believers can open themselves to illness through wrong relationships with other believers. Once again, the importance of what we discussed in part 4 is evident.

We see, then, that healing the sick is not so much a matter of method or technique, but rather a question of grasping how Jesus relied on his Father, and operated in the power of the Holy Spirit, on the basis of his reading of Scripture (Isa 61:1-2 as quoted in Luke 4:18-19). This path, which was shown to the first apostles, is open to believers today. I believe God is pleased when his followers attempt to heal the sick.

Much of this chapter has been about my own experience. This is not because I regard myself as good at healing. Rather the reverse. I have chosen to present my own doubts and experience as an accurate record of someone attempting to "inherit the promises by faith and patience." When it comes to practising healing, I don't doubt that most readers of this book will do better than I have done.