

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 31, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 4:23; JAMES 5:14,15; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:7,9

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.”

“Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the Church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.”

“Now to each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit... gifts of healing...”

THE HEALING MINISTRY OF CHRIST

The ministry of healing was an essential part of the work our Lord came into the world to do. In no sense was it a side issue. It was a function which He Himself invariably ranked along with His teaching and preaching. The healing miracles were no mere incidental works of pity; they were rather the result of Christ's strong conviction that He had come into the world to redeem our human personality in all its aspects, physical as well as spiritual. Jesus came as a Preacher and as a Healer; and when He sent out His followers to carry on His work, it was with a dual commission that He sent them - to preach and to heal. “He appointed twelve,” says St. Mark, “that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons” (Mark 3:14,15 - New King James Version). The mighty works of Christ are part of the very texture of the evangelical record, and a main part of our Lord's mission to this earth.

There are two questions which naturally and inevitably force themselves upon our attention as we investigate this subject:

1. Why did Jesus devote Himself to the curing of disease? It was certainly not in order to draw attention to Himself, for after healing someone He would invariably say, “See that you don't tell anyone” (Matthew 8:4). Also, if His reason for performing healing miracles had been to prove that He was God, then surely, He would have kept the power of doing such works to Himself. But in fact, He entrusted that power to His followers. The disciples also healed the sick, and throughout the centuries the Church, in the power of her Lord, has also engaged in the ministry of healing.

According to the Gospels, there were two reasons why our Lord devoted Himself to the curing of disease:

a. There was His compassion for all hurt things. When Jesus laid His hands upon a leper's sores, He was not playing to the gallery. He did it because His heart was filled with pity. And it was not a cheap compassion. Our English word “compassion” is composed of two Latin

words and means “suffering with.” That is what compassion meant for Jesus -- suffering with the leper, suffering with the epileptic boy, suffering with the blind beggar by the roadside, sharing their pain and loneliness, and then doing something about it.

The other reason He healed the sick was this:

b. He always regarded disease as an intruder in God’s world. It was an enemy that had to be fought to the death. Jesus never became resigned to all the pain and sorrow that He encountered. Never was a sufferer turned away with the words, “I’m sorry, friend, but I cannot heal you because it is God’s will that you should suffer.” Jesus was not resigned to leprosy or epilepsy or blindness.

It is interesting to note that He often used the work of healing to illustrate the breakup of the kingdom of evil. Remember that in those days all diseases were regularly attributed to the power of demons. So, whenever a cure was effected, it meant that one of these evil spirits had been cast out. And therefore, when, through Jesus and His followers, the work of healing suddenly began to go forward on a gigantic scale, it meant that the whole kingdom of evil and darkness was being shaken to its foundations, was indeed breaking up, and the Kingdom of God was at last coming into its own.

When His seventy-two followers, whom He had sent out two by two, came back with news of marvelous cures, Jesus rejoiced, and exclaimed, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven!” (Luke 10:18).

We come now to our second question:

2. How can the Church engage in the ministry of healing today? One of the most significant trends in modern Christianity is the renewed interest in the healing ministry of the Church. We hear a great deal today about what is called “psychosomatic medicine.” Now “psychosomatic” is a big word, but it comes from two Greek words which mean “soul” and “body.”

When I was a minister in Canada we had a member of the congregation who worked in an engineering plant. He was a typical hypochondriac, and everyone knew it, and they used to conspire against him! He would go into work on a Monday morning, and the first person he met would say, “Jack, are you feeling all right?” and Jack would say, “Yes, why do you ask?” And with a sad face his work mate would say, “Well, you look awful.” Within five minutes five others would make a point of approaching Jack to remind him how pale he looked, how his hands seemed to shake, how he was obviously losing weight — until poor old Jack was ready to go home, crawl into bed, and give up the ghost! You see, his problem was psychosomatic!

The medical profession is realizing more and more that so many ailments which afflict mankind today originate in an emotional or spiritual maladjustment or disharmony. Carl Gustav Jung, the famous Swiss psychiatrist, in his book, Modern Man in Search of a Soul, supports the reestablishment of harmonious relations between medical science, psychology and religious faith. He writes, “During the past 30 years, people from all the civilized countries of the earth

have consulted me. I have treated many hundreds of patients. Among all my patients in the second half of life -- that is to say, over 35 -- there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook. Indeed, it is high time," he adds, "for the clergyman and psychotherapist to join forces to meet this great spiritual task... It seems to me that side by side with the decline of religious life, the neuroses grow noticeably more frequent."

How can the Church engage in the ministry of healing today? I think there are two ways in which we may cooperate with God:

a. By that ancient practice which is being revived today by the Church -- the practice of the Laying on of Hands. This was used by our Lord repeatedly, and the promise was given by Him that those who believe on Him should lay their hands on the sick and they shall recover (Mark 16:18). Let me say that I do not believe that I possess the gift of healing, although I know several ministers who undoubtedly have this gift. But I do believe that the gift resides in the Body of Christ, and especially in the elders of the Church as a corporate group. James says, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the Church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up."

I could cite case after case of how I have seen this happen in my own ministry. The case of our good friend Tom Uber is significant, and he has kindly given me permission to tell you about it. Tom, as you know, is a big strong man who was the heavyweight wrestling champion at the U.S. Naval Academy when he was a cadet - a man who is certainly not deficient in "intestinal fortitude." However, he came to me one day some years ago and said, "Graham, I have discovered that I have a hernia on the right side. I have never had an operation and I'm scared stiff at the very thought of surgery. Would you and the elders lay hands on me for a complete healing of this condition?" My immediate reaction was, "But Tom, this is a simple, non-life-threatening surgical procedure." "Yes," he said, "I know that but I feel I can't face it." It was evident that Tom badly needed the Body of Christ to affirm his faith in this healing procedure, so, with some reluctance, I arranged for the healing service to take place at the next Session meeting. It was a moving experience, and the Holy Spirit was much in evidence as we laid hands upon him, anointed him with oil, and prayed for his recovery. What was the result? Two weeks later at Bethesda Naval Hospital his surgeons examined him, and said: "Tom, you won't believe this and we can't explain it, but there is no trace of that hernia whatsoever!"

Now, there is an interesting sequel to that story. Two years later Tom came to me again, with the news that he had developed another hernia, this time on the left side. "But," he said, "God has removed all fear of surgery from me, and I'm going to have the operation!" - which, by the way, was eminently successful.

Now let me say a few things by way of caution:

- (1) The laying on of hands should never take the place of careful medical diagnosis

and treatment. The Church ought always to work in closest cooperation with the medical profession. Refusal to do this is the shameful heresy of Christian Science and some so-called “faith healers.” When a person obviously has a suppurating appendix, we would not practice the laying on of hands, nor would Christ expect us to. We would see that he went to the hospital to have the infected organ removed. Interestingly enough, the Book of Acts records only three people who used the gift of physical healing - Peter, Philip, and Paul; and even they, apparently, didn’t often exercise this gift. Also, nowhere in the New Testament letters are Christians ever commanded to heal people as we are commanded to evangelize, or give, or show mercy; and this is significant.

(2) The laying on of hands, I believe, should be limited to a small gathering of concerned fellow believers, such as a meeting of the Church Session. I can find no authority in the New Testament for the modern “Healing Mission”; and my opinion is that they do a distinct disservice to the cause of Christ and bring the healing ministry of the Church into disrepute. In the great crowded healing service the power of suggestion is too dangerously used; there often is shown on the part of the healing evangelist little of the humility of Christ; and unless great care is exercised, and attendance confined to those who have been counselled with and instructed beforehand, healing services are thronged with people who are in an unhealthy emotional state, who want a sensation much more than they want God.

(3) The basic aim in the laying on of hands should be the person’s unity with God - this has priority even over the aim of his recovery to health. If this is not made clear to him, and if he remains unhealed, he may fall into depression. Perhaps the ideal mental condition for the person who is to receive the laying on of hands is that of entire surrender to the will of God in the circumstances. The laying on of hands is an act of worship. In that act God comes near to the sufferer, and the sufferer responds to God’s love and mercy. The touching by the elders is the symbol of God’s love making contact with the human soul. The sufferer is enabled to make a better response to God because of the sacramental act of touching. Thus, into the sufferer’s personality there is discharged that powerful and precious spiritual energy and renewal that comes from God Himself.

(4) The gift of healing does not depend primarily on the sick person’s faith. The belief that lack of faith prevents healing is related to the erroneous idea that an individual’s sickness is the result of his personal sin. The rabbis used to teach that dropsy was due to immorality, jaundice to hatred, liver trouble to backbiting, and leprosy to an evil tongue!

Now some illnesses may indeed be the direct result of personal sin. Some were sick in the Church at Corinth because they abused the Lord’s supper. And what about the AIDS epidemic today? However, although disease and death have come to the human race in general because of Adam’s sin, it is a cruel hoax to claim that all individual sickness is the consequence of personal sin, or that a person of sufficient faith will be healed. Our Lord exploded this false theory when, asked whether a man had been born blind because of his own or his parents’ sin, He stated, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life” (John 9:1-3).

Many wonderful Christians get sick. Was Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” due to personal sin?

On the other hand, many openly sinning Christians enjoy robust health! To say that sickness comes from personal iniquity is devastating, creating a guilt complex, and, leading to despairing conclusions such as, "I must be an awful sinner; God must be punishing me!"

God's main purpose for the believer is to conform him to the image of Christ. Whether or not God heals depends on whether illness or recovery best contributes to that end. And so, the gift of healing should not be exercised on the basis of the sufferer's faith, but on the condition of the will of God. How wrong it is to affirm that an ailing disciple is out of the will of God, or deficient in faith, if, in fact, his affliction is designed by God to develop his walk with the Lord.

The other way in which the Church can help further the ministry of healing today is not only through the practice of the laying on of hands, but also by

b. The Practice of Intercessory Prayer. James 5:16 says, "Pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." The prayer of faith is the prayer of trustful expectancy. We don't know very much about the laws that govern prayer, any more than our grandparents knew about atomic energy. But that doesn't mean that we can't use prayer.

You see, our prayers can do what our arms would have done if we had lived in the days of Christ's presence on earth. If we had lived when He was here, I'm sure we would have carried our sick friends and laid them down before Him. We must remember that today our prayers bring the sufferer and Christ into living proximity and vital relationship. Never underestimate the power of intercessory prayer.

My wife has given me permission to mention an amazing thing that happened to her. For five years she had suffered from a severe and very painful form of bursitis in her shoulder. It kept her awake night after night, and just wore her out. Her doctor had tried everything imaginable to help her, without avail. One Sunday evening six years ago she turned on the television to a Christian station, to find that a program was in progress to which she had seldom listened -- it was Pat Robertson's "700 Club." In the course of his remarks Mr. Robertson paused, and, looking into the TV camera, he said, "There is a lady out there who has had bursitis in her shoulder these many years. Let us stop for a moment, and together let us all pray that she may be completely healed." And he led in prayer. Now, like many of you, my wife had always had mixed feelings about spiritual healing -- she just wasn't sure how to regard it. But guess what happened -- the next morning she awoke and the pain was gone! Now did she tell me what a great thing had happened to her? You bet she didn't! She waited two whole weeks - to make sure it was "for real," and then she said, "I believe I'm healed," and she told me the whole story, and we rejoiced together! By the way, the pain has never returned.

In spite of the reign of science, the Church must be called back to the ministry of intercession for the sick. In the same sentence, we read that Jesus sent His followers out to "preach the Kingdom of God, and to heal the sick" (Luke 9:2). We have done the former, but the latter we have handed over almost entirely to the medical profession. The doctors are doing magnificent work, but they cannot do all the work.

It must never be supposed that healing takes place only in the realm of medicine. It makes nonsense of all the healing ministry of Jesus to suppose that religion and health never have anything to do with one another. The spiritual world has immense healing energies which are scarcely tapped in this modern age of reliance upon pure science and organic therapy. We must be called away from a purely materialistic interpretation of life which is invading the Church and cheating Christian people of the fullness of that power which is their heritage in Christ.

Let the elders of the Church be encouraged to engage in the laying on of hands for the physical healing of the sick, and let us all be much more active in the practice of intercessory prayer for those who have such varied needs; for as Tennyson affirmed,

“More things are wrought by prayer
than this world dreams of.”

AMEN.