

DO YOU WANT TO GET WELL?

By Gordon Ferguson

Introduction

This article is a written form of a spoken message delivered on March 28, 2004 to the Phoenix Valley Church of Christ. As with the previous sermon, “What Do We Now Believe?,” I wanted our members to be able to study out this material in more depth, and the written format will again allow that possibility. As mentioned in that previous article, I am taking the liberty to edit my own material by adding some things that were not included in the oral presentation of the lesson, and perhaps leave out a few other items. The question reflected in the title comes from Jesus’ question of the invalid recorded in John 5:1-9. Often this man is seen as not wanting to get well badly enough to put forth his best effort, and hence Jesus’ question of him. Perhaps that is true, but the point that stands out to me is that no matter what our condition, Jesus wants to help and stands ready to help. He did heal the man after all, didn’t he?

However, the question Jesus asked nearly two thousand years ago resounds in our age as well. Especially is it appropriate when we may not be doing great spiritually. Note that the question is not “Do you want to *be* well,” but “Do you want to *get* well.” One thing that can be said for the guy mentioned in John 5: he gets a “P” for perseverance – he didn’t give up, and ended up with the blessing. Although my points will not revolve around that idea, it is a classic principle that those who hang in long enough usually find the higher ground spiritually that they are looking for. But let’s talk about the need and the path of getting well (which includes persevering).

What Is It To Be Well?

Physically, after an illness, it is great when we wake up one morning and feel so differently! Even after a good night’s sleep, it is wonderful to awake rested and then enjoy a brisk prayer walk (especially on the cool mornings we have been having recently). It just feels good – really good. Spiritually, feeling well is directly connected with being full of the Holy Spirit. A good indicator of our wellness quotient is Galatians 5:22-23, which reads: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” For me, the first three of these are the best indicators – love, joy, peace. In fact, just the definition of love found in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 pretty well does it in my case. Do these words describe your present spiritual attitudes and actions?

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

Peter’s comments in 1 Peter 4:8 may be the acid test of our spiritual wellness, as he states: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” Grace and forgiveness of our fellow humans, and fellow Christians, are inseparably connected to our spiritual health. When I’m well, I just feel God’s love and in turn, I feel love for about everyone. And when I’m not well, critical, unloving thoughts lie near the surface of my heart. How about you?

What Is It To *Not* Be Well?

To begin with, lots of gradations are possible – both physically and spiritually. For example, we can be physically under the weather only slightly, being tired, listless, or having a headache. Obviously, these are not good ways to feel, but the problem is not serious enough to put us in bed. Moving into the more serious physical maladies, we can be debilitated with a virus or similar illness to the point that we simply cannot even get out of bed. At the end of that spectrum, our physical condition may be terminal. However, at the outset of a terminal illness, we may not even know that we have the disease.

Spiritual illnesses can be found in much the same gradations. On the milder end of the possibilities, we can be having a down day, a poor week, or a bad month. (Actually, I've had some bad *years*!) Although we are not at our best, we are not in terrible shape and are still relatively functional. However, if we remain in this state too long and don't seriously attempt to change it, being listless and unmotivated can lead to being seen by God as "lukewarm" or "having lost one's first love" (Revelation 2 & 3). We may keep going through the motions outwardly, but inwardly the situation is more serious than we may imagine. We can move across the line and become terminal, unless urgent intervention ensues. We can only wonder how many times God has found a way to intervene, and to nurse us back to spiritual health.

How do you know if you are really not well? If being well means that we are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit, being unwell would be the opposite – being characterized by the acts of the sinful nature. Listen carefully to Paul's words in Galatians 5:19-21:

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Relational challenges that are not being resolved, sinful behavior, being negative about ourselves, others and life in general are a dead giveaway that we are unhealthy spiritually.

What Will It Take To Get Well?

If our problem is fairly minor, it may be simply a matter of conditioning – getting back into condition. If we make sure that we are praying consistently, reading our Bibles and spiritual books regularly, we will improve our condition, perhaps quickly. Additionally, getting time with other Christians to bare our hearts is another essential part of getting back into a healthy spiritual state. I have heard so many comments from disciples about how they did so much better with a regularly scheduled discipling partner and discipling time. During the last year as our ministry structure was being re-evaluated, many stopped having discipling times. We must remember that we are the one whom made that choice. It is unreasonable to criticize the structural control being exerted in our lives and then decry the lack of structure being provided. What this boils down to is simply this: take responsibility for yourself and get the help you need from others. "One another" responsibilities come from God anyway, not from leaders. I recall at times being absolutely shocked at the difference in myself after one time of unloading

my heart and burdens with someone else. Let's not allow Satan to keep us from availing ourselves of all the resources that God provides for our healthiness.

If our spiritual malady is more serious, more serious measures will be needed to offset it. Perhaps a time of fasting and prayer, a spiritual getaway; obtaining some in-depth counseling, or working out relational challenges are other ingredients in our prescription for getting well. But what if our condition is potentially terminal? We must pull out all of the stops and get help – fast! The longer you wait to get treatment, the more the disease progresses, just like cancer.

I know that the events of last year took a toll on just about all of us, and it has taken some time to get healthy again. Some of us are still not healthy. It's like having an accident or surgery – time to recover is needed, but also needed is the right treatment to heal and to heal correctly. As a leader, I have tried to be wise about this process (compared to the way I think some other leaders may have approached it). Some have tried to short-circuit the healing process and said, in effect, “We've all been hurt and will all be hurt again. Just get over it.” (Try that approach on your wife after hurting her!) Of course we all have to get over it, but ascertaining the process of proper healing is the issue at hand. When told to move on before they are healed, some in response have said, “Wait, I can't walk yet, much less run!” I understand that response, for time is needed to heal from big emotional hits, as well as taking the proper approach for, well, *healthy* healing.

What causes us to remain stuck and unable to move forward? Bottom line, a situation that violates our sense of fairness, justice and righteousness to the point that our foundation of faith is seriously damaged – and relational blows are the most damaging of all. When all of the “systemic sins” of our movement were forced out into the light almost overnight, some were appalled that their own idealistic views were not really accurate. Others, already quite in touch with our movement sins, said “I told you so,” and their frustrations, anger and bitterness leapt out of their hearts and mouths. It was a trying time to all of us, and a time from which some have yet to recover.

Could the Damage Have Been Lessened?

Looking back on what happened in the past year brings much to my mind – what did happen, what could have happened and what I think should have happened. However, I understand that hindsight is always much closer to 20/20, which hopefully keeps me from being overly critical. With that in mind, I do have some observations about what might have been done to reduce the amount of collateral damage in the upheaval of 2003. We have to try and learn all that we can from past mistakes, for history has a way of repeating itself. Let me begin by saying that I don't think an upheaval could have been avoided. I believe it was needed and brought about by God – a case of divine discipline right in our face (and hopefully it made it down to our hearts!).

I have heard some leaders say that our movement was already making changes (that part's true), and would have gone on to make all other needed changes. Personally, I don't come even *close* to buying into that brand of thinking, which to me seems unrealistically optimistic. The biggest changes needed were and are in the realm of how we view, treat and motivate people, and we still have much to unlearn and learn in this area. Our sins were serious and deep-rooted, and it took a direct hit from God to force

the depth and breadth of changes needed. We haven't yet implemented all of them, but on the other hand, we have made tremendous progress in a short time. In fact, I am aware of only one other movement in recent history that has made the amount of changes that we have in such a short period of time. To those who remain impatient (and critical) with the changes that have been made, I would simply encourage them to make a list of what has already changed. That should give you hope for the future, and increase your patience!

But if we had it all to do over again, what could have been done differently to reduce the collateral damage (in war terminology, the "friendly fire")? Since the Kriete letter pretty much lit the fuse, let's start there. To begin with, I think the letter could have (*should* have) been written in a less incendiary manner. I think that God stirred Henry up to write it, but I wish it had been written in a way that forced us to face the issues and deal with them, howbeit in a more discerning manner. In the minds of many, *all* leaders were judged guilty of *all* that any leader did anywhere, and all churches or ministry groups were judged guilty of all that *any* group had done. Good intentions, benefit of the doubt, innocent until proven guilty, grace and forgiveness were forgotten principles in far too many cases. The letter started both a holy revolution and an unholy revolution at the same time.

But rest assured that I think something drastic had to be done to force change. One mature leader in Boston put it something like this: "God used the approach of kindness in trying to get leaders to repent through the writing of the book, *Golden Rule Leadership*." When leaders in high places were resistant to that approach, God sent Henry." (As one of the co-authors of the book, with my accompanying biases, I agree with his analysis!) As I have often said in the past year, in our movement we have done many right things in many wrong ways. I think Henry's letter falls in that category – a right thing done in a wrong way. Once Henry's letter was made public, I wished that a second letter would have followed pretty quickly, urging people to continue to push (even demand) change, but in ways that were more godly. We can't run the clock back now, but we all have to learn from our hindsight experiences, for "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

Another thing that could have reduced collateral damage in 2003 was the right kind of apologies from leaders. What is the right kind of apology? One, it is *specific*. By the way, much of what I say about apologies are lessons I have learned (often the hard way!) in my marriage and family. Saying to my wife, "I'm sorry I messed up yesterday" just doesn't get it done! She wants to know the specifics of what I am apologizing for – at least all of them that I see. The clamor last year about whether a given leader "got it" or not is reflective of this point. Some leaders apparently were afraid if they said too much, people would become even more critical. Humility is the only judge needed of that concept! When other leaders were painfully specific, people's minds were relieved that leaders did in fact "get it" and thus were less likely to repeat the same sins. I understand the lack of trust when leaders were unwilling to apologize specifically. Frankly, I share it.

Two, apologies should have been humble and heartfelt. Again, when I say "I'm sorry" to Theresa in a terse, begrudging manner, even after being specific, it doesn't free her up. She wants me to feel the right kind of pain at having caused her pain by my sin.

Bottom line, she expects true humility from me, and since God settles for no less, her expectations are totally reasonable and righteous. Our people expected humble responses from us, and so did God. Leaders who were specific and humble fared much, much better than those who were not.

Three (and this is often overlooked), appropriate apologies should have been made by the appropriate people. In the Boston church leaders' apology letter, a very important sentence read thus: "The higher the level of leadership, the greater the responsibility." Higher-level leaders were the ones who made policies and were most influential in determining what we would do and how we would do it. To me, one of the saddest parts of the collateral damage during our upheaval was in how younger leaders were viewed and treated. Little discernment was practiced on this point, and those *least* responsible were judged to be about as guilty as those who were in reality *most* responsible. The end result was that many highly promising young leaders resigned and will likely never return to ministry staff leadership again. They did not deserve the harsh judgment and treatment they received.

I commend Steve Johnson, former World Sector Leader, for understanding this principle and taking responsibility for what went on under his direction. He also recognized that his apology had to be made on as broad a scale as his realm of influence had been felt. Apologies in more private settings are great, but if not as broadly directed as the influence wielded, those hurt are left unsatisfied and perhaps unhealed. Regarding young leaders in the NYC church, he wrote the following in his public apology letter:

They were trying to do as they were taught and still often would be conflicted between what I said and what they saw going on in the church. It was my mistake to put so many of you under such young leadership. Blame me, not them. They did work hard for you. I don't know how to deal with the pain I feel for having hurt such young hearts or for having placed all of you in a position where you felt so disregarded and disrespected. It was all my fault. I am so sorry.

If leaders with greater influence had taken this approach early on, much of the negative impact on young leaders might have been avoided and we as a movement would have been better off for it. If all leaders had quickly followed all three of these principles of righteous apologies, the damage would have been reduced significantly.

What Will It Take To Get Unstuck?

Well, enough of looking at what might have been. Let's learn the lessons from what could or should have been, and then get on with being healed. While I understand why some people are still stuck, my concern is that at some point if we don't begin walking, we may never walk again – we may lose the ability to bounce back. When we experience major emotional hits, such as the death of a loved one or a divorce, it takes time to heal. It often takes a year to start coming out of the fog. I have been patient with those who were still in the fog after the events of 2003, but now I am becoming more and more alarmed when their healing process is making no progress. Perhaps the most apt analogy I can use to describe the condition of those who can't seem to get past the past is that they have spiritual hypothermia. A person with physical hypothermia has experienced a shock to his system to the point that his system starts shutting down. His shock is exposure to cold that is beyond his body's ability to cope. For example, think of someone who fell through the ice of a frozen lake in the wilderness. Assume that he crawled out of the lake and started walking toward his car two miles away. After the icy

shock subsides, his body begins to shut down and he starts to feel warm, and then he feels very sleepy. Thinking that the walking has warmed up his body, he has a strong desire to sit down and rest or even take a quick nap. If he gives in to that desire, he will be found as a frozen clump sometime later. What he has mistaken as warmth is his physical system shutting down. He must force himself to keep going until he is able to find real warmth in a protected environment.

We can reach a similar point spiritually, in that we can be stuck to the point that we all but lose our ability to bounce back. Unless we keep moving, we will die, and our moving has to be in harmony with God's directions. If I could choose only one passage to describe this direction, it would unquestionably be 1 Peter 2:18-3:9. Earlier in this lesson I said that our being stuck spiritually results from experiencing a situation that violates our sense of fairness, justice and righteousness to the point that our foundation of faith is seriously damaged. This passage in 1 Peter is shocking to our sensibilities in several respects, but it describes how Jesus dealt with such situations. Read these words carefully:

Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. [19] For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. [20] But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. [21] To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. [22] "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." [23] When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly (1 Peter 2:18-23).

My sensibilities are shocked immediately by reading the word "slaves." The very idea that one human would own another human is repugnant. Yet, it was reality in the first century, and God insisted on his people responding righteously in what would appear to be ungodly situations. Slaves were to be submissive and respectful – always, and to every slave master, whether gentle and kind, or harsh and overbearing. Why? Not because of who the master was but because of who *they* were. Better yet, because of *whose* they were! They were children of the King, and the King had already shown the way of the cross to them. Just what is the way of the cross? Doing what is right and righteous no matter how badly and unfairly you are being treated. Isn't that part and parcel of what following Jesus is all about in the first place? The first decision to make in becoming a true Christian is the hardest one of all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). This step is not optional. We cannot be saved without taking it and then continuing to take it all of our lives.

Note the wording in 1 Peter 3, as the "way of the cross" principle is applied in other situations. "Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives" (verse 1). What is "the same way" but the way of the cross just described? Read verses 1-6 to see what the response of the wife to her husband is to be, regardless of his treatment of her. My sensibilities are in shock once more! "Husbands, in the same way..." (verse 7). Again, the way of the cross is applied to the husband's treatment of his wife – regardless of what her treatment of him might be. Peter just won't let up in applying this principle! But the most challenging application of all is yet to come. Our sensibilities are going to be hit, and hit hard, one last time.

In verses 8-9, we read: “Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. [9] Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.” The word “finally” shows that Peter is making his final application of the principle, and this time it is to the church as a whole. Verse 8 describes life in the kingdom the way it should be. But verse 9 describes life in the kingdom the way it shouldn’t be and yet sometimes is. The way of the cross is most difficult when those we love most and think should love us most do not treat us lovingly. Yet, God calls us to imitate Jesus and refuse to repay evil with evil and insult with insult. Our love must respond to a lack of love in the same way that Jesus responded to ill treatment, even when from the hands of brothers and sisters in Christ.

One of the most challenging books I have read in the past year is all about this subject. It is entitled *Exquisite Agony* and is written by Gene Edwards (author also of *The Tale of Three Kings*). I cannot take the space to quote the excerpts I read in the oral presentation of this lesson, but you would do well to read it, for it helps the principles of 1 Peter 2 & 3 come alive. The book is brief and can be quickly read, but it will convict you mightily if you read it with an open heart. Essentially, the writer avows that all crucifixions are from God, and unless we accept our ill treatment at the hands of men as being ultimately from God, we will not get well. Without that acceptance, we will have suffered only mistreatment and not crucifixion, and will be damaged as a result. Many are stuck right here. They blame men for their suffering and do not surrender to God as the author of their suffering. Jesus deserved nothing of his crucifixion, for it was ill intentioned treatment at the hands of his own people. They hated him and they killed him, and that was the cause of his death – or so it would seem. What does God say about all of that? Just this: “Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer” (Isaiah 53:10).

Think through the principle suggested in the following verses carefully.

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. [11] For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body (2 Corinthians 4:10-11).

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church (Colossians 1:24).

If Jesus drew the world to himself through suffering unjustly in a godly, almost “other worldly” manner, can we do it in a different way? Any of us can respond reasonably well to just treatment – there is no test involved in that. But who of us can respond righteously to unrighteous treatment (even from our brothers)? The *simple* answer: only those of us determined to go the way of the cross. The *challenging* answer: only those of us determined to be Christians (which demands that we go the way of the cross)!

Edwards dedicates a later chapter in this book to Jesus’ reactions after his resurrection. With tongue in cheek, he describes the bitter responses that might have been forthcoming from Jesus, but shows that a true resurrection following a true crucifixion (one accepted as from God) leaves no bitterness at all. Resurrections make everything new, especially the past. The author goes on to mention that so many of us in the aftermath of our crucifixion cannot leave the past behind, and insist on recounting the details of our ill treatment. When we won’t let it go, the reason is clear. We have not accepted our crucifixion as from God. Period. Therefore, we have been damaged and not healed; hurt and not helped; crippled and not strengthened. Listen to God’s words on

this matter: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed” (Hebrews 12:11-13).

In preaching about the resurrection recently in the NE Region, I recalled these words of an old hymn: “Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No, there’s a cross for everyone, and there’s a cross for me.” Do you believe this, and will you embrace yours? Peter rebuked Jesus for saying that he was going to take the way of the cross (Mark 8:31-38). Jesus then rebuked Peter, calling him “Satan” and saying in Mark 8:33 that Peter did “not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” What were the “things of men?” Answer: a *cross-less* Christianity. Is that what you are after? If you refuse to endure your crosses as being from the hand of God, you are in essence requesting a cross-less Christianity. The sad ending to that request is that Christianity without crosses – Jesus and ours – is no Christianity at all.

Conclusion

Spiritually, how healthy are you right now? If unhealthy, do you want to get well? As with the invalid of John 5, Jesus stands ready to help. But he will not help us in a way contrary to the cross – in fact, he simply *cannot*. The spiritual laws of the universe do not allow other solutions than those from God. Please, let’s all get well, and let’s surrender to the cure that Jesus provides! If I had the past year to do over, I would have responded more wisely and more righteously in a number of situations. However, I don’t have the opportunity to relive last year. I do have the opportunity to repent, learn from my mistakes and begin anew by the grace of God – and so do you. Let’s do it now and let’s do it together. Our future individually and as a church is as bright as the promises of God. May he heal us all, and may we bring him more glory in the future than we ever did or even dreamed of doing in the past!