

## **Matthew 25:36: The Samaritan Prayer Ministry**

### **OUTLINE**

Biblical examples of ministering to the sick  
Historical examples of ministering to the sick

### **INTRODUCTION**

Today we are not going to have a traditional sermon but a topical sermon. We are going to launch a ministry to the sick in our church. For want of a better name we are calling it the Samaritan prayer ministry. The churches ministry to the sick is an ongoing ministry that belongs to the whole body and the time has come for us to be more deliberate in our ministrations. The Samaritan Prayer Ministry is being launched not because there is no ministry to the sick in our church, there is. There are those who visit the sick, who buy their groceries for them, drive them around, mow their lawns and pray for them. But as our church grows we need more organization so that no one is neglected in their need. We want to invite more people to be more deliberate and more organised in this area. One of the reasons why I feel this is necessary is because there are often needs that are not brought to my attention. For example, one dear lady was away from church for three weeks before I was informed that she was at home sick. I am often on the lookout for new comers and am not able to see if everyone is here on a Sunday so I will need someone to inform me that so and so is sick. Not only that prayer is powerful and we need to multiply prayer for those who are sick. Awareness for the purpose of prayer is most important for we are dependent upon God for everything and He has appointed prayer as the means by which He brings His will to pass. We know that there have been those who have done shopping for those who are laid aside, or who have acted as a taxi, or just phoned up those who are house bound. We want to ensure that more are involved in this vital aspect of church life. I am also aware that there is a need for more coordination just recently we put out a call for folk to mow lawns, there were many willing volunteers, and there have been instances when someone would travel in to town to do the job to find it had already been done. More organization and communication will make for happier and more effective service.

Ministry to the sick is just part of what it means to be part of the body of Christ. There is a unity that is real that issues in us caring for one another. Paul reminds us that because we are a single body in Christ by the Spirit, 'If one member suffers, all suffer together,' 1 Cor. 12:26a. Every single one of us has a part to play, for some they will have the time and ability to act in concrete practical ways and be bodily present, others will be able to phone, others will be able to pray or make meals. But this is something that matters to each one of us. So today I would like to remind us of some of the bible's teaching on this issue, and then give a little historical perspective as well.

### **Biblical examples of ministering to the sick**

The most obvious example of ministering to the sick is Jesus own ministry. In the gospels we see Jesus sustaining a healing ministry everywhere He went. His ministry was a sign of the coming of the King and illuminated the nature of His reign and Kingdom. However, we also see that Christ was driven by compassion for the sick, Matthew 14:14, 'When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.' Christ had deep feeling towards their infirmity and ministered to their needs. If Christlikeness is what we are saved for then a deep compassion for those who are suffering goes hand in hand with this. We will see in our historical survey that Christians valued the individual

because they were made in the image of God and as a display of neighbourliness ministered to the sick. At times Jesus healed all the sick, Luke 4:40, 'Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.'

David as a godly man showed deep concern for the sick, Ps. 35:13, 'But I, when they were sick—I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting; I prayed with head bowed on my chest. I went about as though I grieved for my friend or my brother; as one who laments his mother, I bowed down in mourning.' In neither Christ nor David do we see the modern indifference to suffering, Christ acted in compassion and David in earnest prayer.

The two key passages in Christ's teaching are Matthew 25:36 and the parable of the Good Samaritan. Matthew 25:36 comes from the famous parable of the sheep and the goats. On the day of Judgement at the end of time all of humanity will be divided into the sheep and the goats. In this description of the final judgement you will notice that the emphasis is not on the confession of those being judged but their deeds. For though we are justified by faith alone, true faith is demonstrated by works, and so it is our works that are weighed to determine whether we have saving faith. In particular it is the deeds that were done to the church, 'the least of these my brothers,' which Christ can identify with Himself, because the church is His body, and so He says, 'you did it to me.' This identification of the church with Himself is repeated again when He says to Paul, 'why are you persecuting me?' in reference to the church. Notice in v35-36 that various categories of need that the true believer seeks to relieve. Firstly, the need of food and clothing, 'For I was hungry and you gave you food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink.' Secondly, hospitality, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.' Thirdly, another form of poverty, nakedness, 'I was naked and you clothed me.' Fourthly, ministering to the sick, 'I was sick and you visited me.' Fifthly, and ministering to the persecuted Christians, 'I was in prison and you came to me.' And you will notice from the context that these were not deliberate Christ targeted actions, these actions were the spontaneous love that one Christian shows to another in need, it is a sign of the new birth within us. They did not deliberately set out to serve Christ through His body. 1 John 3:14-24, 'We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. 15 Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. 17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; 20 for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; 22 and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24 Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.'

In a first world country where we have welfare and hospitals we can become complacent and shift responsibility to others and close our hearts to the needy. One of the great battles of the Western Christian is to keep our hearts open towards the needy and not expect the politicians we voted in and the taxes and tithes we pay to replace the tangible love we ought to show daily.

The other text which has been foundational in influencing Christians to care for the sick is the parable of the Good Samaritan. We find it in Luke 10:25-37. Please notice the context,

a lawyer is testing Jesus to see how he can earn eternal life. Jesus asks the lawyer to reveal his understanding of the law. The lawyer has a good head knowledge if you love God and your neighbour you will be one who will go to heaven. For if a person believes in God, trusting in Him as He is revealed in the bible and obeys Him this reveals that he is indeed one headed for heaven. Jesus answer to do this points out that He is aware that there would be many with an intellectual faith but no heart reality or action. V29 shows the lawyer trying to justify himself, by debating the definition of neighbour. It is at this point that Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The parable is intended by Christ to reveal to this racist Jew that his heart does not love his neighbour. You will notice that Jesus uses the examples of a priest and Levite, those who had ceremonial responsibilities in Jerusalem, and yet who did not show mercy as examples of false and empty religion. A Jew might figure that because he goes to temple and keeps the laws relating to clean and unclean that he is alright before God, but Jesus points out that a religious life void of love is useless. A Samaritan who has a deficient theology, and who were hated by the Jews is used as an example of what true love looks like. We see that the Samaritan had a heart of compassion and stopped to help. The Samaritan touched and attended to the man personally. The Samaritan put up with the inconvenience of walking not riding and took time out of his calendar to attend to the man's needs. He even put his hand in his pocket to ensure the man's full recovery and pledged himself to fulfil any debts that might arise. The priest was not to come into contact with dead people and perhaps feared the man was dead, the Levite might become unclean by attending to the man so for the purpose of remaining clean he stayed away. Jesus is criticising the religious attitudes that justified separating from your neighbour and not fulfilling your duty of love to them. Jesus is dealing with the same type of people that James is fighting, a people with a verbal confession and an intellectual faith but who are loveless, even using religion to justify it. The lawyer wanted to debate who a neighbour was and was probably going to bring in all sorts of arguments and distinctions, but he is shamed by Jesus with this story. And when Jesus puts a question to him, by his own mouth he defines neighbourliness not in terms of legal categories but in terms of showing mercy. Jesus tells him to go and live out his faith instead of spiritualizing his disobedience.

This is our model for compassion. The teaching of Jesus is what we are called to put into practice and if we do it will be a radical love unlike any that the world knows. Let us all hear this call to an otherworldly love and show the fruit of the Spirit. By this the world will know that we are His.

### **Historical examples of ministering to the sick<sup>1</sup>**

The early church excelled in caring for the sick. Although Rome had large cities and great roads, politics and armies, it lacked compassion and suffered from the side effects of urbanization. Retired soldiers, many villagers attracted to the big cities, and many migrants moving around the empire filled the Roman cities. Should they sicken, no clinics or hospitals existed to provide healing or even basic nursing care. True, one could find physicians. But their fees were too steep for most. Some towns did hire a public physician, but institutional health care was unheard of. So hoi polloi (commoners) were left to rely on folk healers and sellers of herbs, amulets, and quack remedies.... Destitute families lacking any resources to help sometimes even abandoned the chronically ill to die. In Rome, sick or elderly slaves were routinely left to waste away on Tiber Island. Unwanted children were often left to die of exposure. If a father decided that the family couldn't afford to feed

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<sup>1</sup> My information was taken from: <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/new-era-in-roman-healthcare/> accessed 10/11/2016.

another child, that child would be abandoned on the steps of a temple or in the public square. Almost without exception defective newborns were exposed in this way.... The classical world possessed no religious or philosophical basis for the concept of the divine dignity of human persons, and without such support, the right to live was granted or withheld by family or society almost at a whim. As a result, the chronically ill could be seen everywhere in the streets, baths, and forums—many of them homeless and begging. Some turned to the temples of healing gods, such as Isis and Serapis, who were believed to heal supernaturally.

Most famous of these gods was Asclepius, who was worshiped in hundreds of temples and shrines throughout the Roman Empire. The sick would come as pilgrims to the temples. Here they would offer a small sacrifice, so humble that even the poor could afford it, then sleep overnight in the abaton, or sacred enclosure, where they believed that the god might appear to them, sometimes in a dream, to heal them. Those who most often sought help were either suffering from chronic or hopeless diseases or were very poor. Some were healed, according to temple inscriptions. By the second century A.D., physicians were available at some temples to offer advice on medical regimens. But pilgrims came for healing, not for long-term medical care, which was not provided. In fact, the dying were not allowed in the temple precincts, since their death would pollute the sanctuary.'

It was into this moral environment that Christianity was thrust and made its mark. Christian charity has a better moral basis than Roman stoicism for attending to the sick seeing people made in the image of God and having God's own example in the incarnation to imitate; and it went further than Judaism that would only look after its own. 'Christian theology thus birthed a personal and corporate charity surpassing any previously known. Church leaders encouraged all Christians to visit the sick and help the poor, and each congregation also established an organized ministry of mercy. Presbyters (priests) and deacons added benevolent ministry to their sacramental roles. They collected alms each Sunday, distributed by deacons. Widows and deaconesses provided a ministry of mercy to women. Despite persecution and their small numbers, Christians maintained an extensive ministry to those in need.

By the third century the number of those receiving aid from the hands of the church had grown considerably, especially in large cities. Congregations created additional minor clerical orders, such as subdeacons and acolytes, to assist deacons in benevolence as well as liturgy.'

A major epidemic led to Christians serving not only themselves but non-Christians as well. 'A devastating epidemic began in 250 and spread from Ethiopia across North Africa, then to Italy and the Western Empire. It lasted 15 to 20 years, and at one point in Rome 5,000 people died in one day.

Beyond offering supplications to the gods for relief, public officials did nothing to prevent the spread of the disease, treat the sick, or even bury the dead. This is not surprising, since the pagans believed that nothing effective could be done in a time of plague other than appeasing the gods.

By 251 the plague swept into Carthage in North Africa. Piles of the dead rotted in the streets, where they had been abandoned by their families. The pagans, casting about for causes, fingered the Christians, and a severe empire-wide persecution erupted. The emperor Decius ordered all Christians to sacrifice to the gods on pain of death. Carthage's bishop, Cyprian, enjoined the city's Christians to give aid to their persecutors and to care for the sick. He urged the rich to donate funds and the poor to volunteer their service for relief efforts, making no distinction between believers and pagans. Under Cyprian's direction, Christians buried the dead left in the streets and cared for the sick and dying. For five years he stood in the breach, organizing relief efforts, until he was forced into exile.

The plague of Cyprian, as it has come to be called, marked a new chapter in early Christian medical charity. For the first time, Christians extended their medical care to pagans as well as Christians.' 'Much later, in Alexandria, Egypt, in about 416, the Christian patriarch of that city organized a corps of men recruited from the poor classes to transport and nurse the sick. They were called the parabalani, the "reckless ones," because they risked their lives by exposing themselves to contagion while assisting the sick. Already in 312, during a widespread plague, Christians in many Eastern cities were performing similar tasks. In the face of epidemics, they seem often to have formed ambulance corps, making up for municipal authorities' failure to help the sick and dying.' 'Christianity did not promise the miraculous healing that the Greek cult of Asclepius did (though such healings were certainly reported throughout the ancient period). But it regularly provided something that was less spectacular and more permanent: care of the sick and the dying by those who demonstrated compassion.' 'In the early fourth century, lay Christian orders began to appear in the large cities of the Eastern Roman Empire. The two best known were the spoudaioi ("the zealous ones") and (in Egypt) the philoponoï ("lovers of labor").'

'The nineteenth century saw a further explosion of Christian efforts on behalf of the sick poor: In Holland, a Mennonite deaconess movement cared for the ill, and in England the Quaker Elizabeth Fry revolutionized care for prisoners and the sick. Taking cues from both of these, Pastors Theodore Fliedner and Wilhelm Loehe pioneered in their native Germany a Lutheran deaconess movement that soon spread throughout Europe. Among the later trainees at the movement's base in Kaiserswerth was the famous Florence Nightingale, who took what she learned there to England, where she founded a school of nursing.

Medical missions have constituted another important branch of Christian medical philanthropy. Missionaries to European colonial possessions often established medical facilities where none had previously existed, and much of their work was invested in the founding of hospitals, leprosaria (treatment facilities for lepers), and other health-related institutions. Many of the leading hospitals in cities throughout the world today are the products of Christian medical or missionary charity.

Prominent historian of medicine Henry Sigerist once wrote that Christianity introduced the "most revolutionary and decisive change in the attitude of society toward the sick," giving sick people a "preferential position" in society that they retain to this day. Christians saw the suffering of others as an opportunity to provide compassionate care in the name of Christ. This was Christianity's novel contribution to healthcare, providing the foundation for the whole tradition of Western medical philanthropy. By the fourth century it led to the creation of the hospital as a uniquely Christian institution. But the hospital would never have succeeded without an earlier long tradition of medical philanthropy integral to the ministry of the early church.'

This is what compassion towards the sick has wrought in the past. We need to recapture this compassionate activism that characterised the early church as an expression of the love of Christ for one another.

Our Samaritan prayer ministry is an attempt to better direct the already existing efforts and to make them more effective. Matt De Beer will be the coordinator for the ministry, being a deacon it will fall under its traditional jurisdiction. There is a form at the back of the church. If you would like to be a part of the prayer chain or called on for practical things like meals or lawnmowing, please put your name down. We will be having a short meeting next Saturday here at the church at 10am to talk over the practical aspects of the ministry and help everyone get on board who would like to minister in this way.