

# Jesus, Our Model, In Ministry to the Disabled

Jesus was frequently involved with individuals affected by disability during his years of ministry. 25 out of the 34 miracles covered in the four Gospels are with people with disabilities. (1) He demonstrated attitudes and actions that we can learn from and be inspired to follow. In John 13:15 Jesus had finished washing his disciple's feet right before the events of the cross and He says "I have set for you an example that you should do as I have done for you". We have God's Perfect Son modeling all through the Gospels how we are to relate to people. This includes people with disabilities. We will see how Jesus viewed the disabled, his compassion, his concern for each one spiritually, his respect and the powerful witness disability can have to the world. He is our example. We are to follow.

First of all, Jesus saw the disabled as people. In most encounters scripture mentions that he touched the people as he healed them. This was true for even the most untouchable in society, the leper, noted in Luke 5:12-13. Another noticeable approach he had with the disabled was how he talked with them. It's not hard to imagine his gentle manner and quiet voice as he talked with anxious parents or smiled back at the one relieved of pain. He called the paralyzed man in Luke 5:20 "friend" and another paralyzed man "son" in Matt. 9:2. He gave them the dignity that society around them did not. At best, the disabled were reduced to life on the streets begging for mercy. This is noted when blind Bartimaeus was calling for mercy as the crowds rebuked him to be silent in Mark 10:46-52. Jesus heard him above the noisy crowd and answered the blind man's cry, and healed him.

Jesus showed compassion in many ways to individuals that were disabled. Notice that in Matt. 4:23-25 it says that Jesus healed "all" that were brought to him in those early years of his ministry. When a crowd of 4,000 was miraculously fed by Jesus and many lame, blind, mute and crippled people were laid at Jesus' feet, Matt. 15:30-31 says that Jesus healed them all. This shows his heart for the disabled. In the account of the 2 blind men in Matt. 20:29-34, two words stand out. The men "shouted" and "cried". It is interesting to note that in English these 2 words have similar meaning, but in the Greek moving from "shouted" to "cried" shows the desperation in their perseverance. (2) Even with the disciples and the noisy crowds trying to silence the men, Jesus heard and tenderly asked them what he could do for them.

In many encounters Jesus chose to not say anything at all, and just healed the disabled person. This is mentioned in Matt. 9:32-34 when a demon possessed/mute man was brought to him. There was also a similar situation with a blind/mute man in Matt. 12:22. Jesus knew what was most needed and quietly and compassionately met that need by giving the man his sight and speech.

Jesus was concerned for the disabled spiritually. Just the number of times he notes the faith of either the individual or the one bringing him, shows the importance Jesus placed on faith. He spoke of the centurion's faith in Matt. 8:5-13 as he told him of his paralyzed servant back home. The centurion believed in the power of Jesus' word and with his word Jesus healed the man's servant. Jesus recognized the faith of the 2 blind men in Matt. 9:27-31 before he healed them. He acknowledged the faith of the 4 friends who lowered the paralyzed man through the roof and the man was healed. When Jesus' response to the paralytic was that his sins were

forgiven, it is clear that the man had a need for forgiveness. Jesus' forgiveness before his healing of the paralyzed man indicates the weight he placed on spiritual health over physical health. The condition of the man's heart was more important to Jesus than if he could walk or see or hear. (3) In Matt. 5:29-30 Jesus said it is better to go through life handicapped – lose an eye or a hand – than for a person to go to hell. To Jesus, spiritual death was certainly a much greater loss than a disability. This topic is again addressed in Matt. 18:8-9 when he says it is better to be without an eye or to be crippled than be thrown into hell for unbelief. Jesus looked at sin seriously. And he used disability to make his point! In Mark 3:1-5 Jesus understood that those who chose to walk in unbelief were truly the ones crippled by fear and blind and deaf to the truth. And interestingly, Jesus calls the disciples on their lack of faith when a father of a boy afflicted by demons and seizures brings his son first to the disciples, who are unable to heal the boy in Luke 9:38-43.

There is nothing in Jesus' interaction with the disabled that indicates they had automatic dispensation for their sins because of their disability – a thought not so foreign in our world today. In fact, in Matt. 11:20, Jesus denounced the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed. That's concerning, being so many of his miracles included healing of the disabled. We know that 9 lepers did not return to Jesus and thank him in Luke 17:11-19, and in Mark 1:45 the healed leper didn't respond as Jesus commanded and spread the word about his healing. The same thing happened in Matt. 9:28 when Jesus charged the 2 blind men to be quiet about their healing as well. We can wonder what it meant to be commanded by Jesus to be quiet about being healed and yet go about as a healed person. How can a person be quiet at all?

Jesus seemed to be sensitive to protecting a person's personal sense of pride. In Mark 7:31 and in Mark 8:22-26 he removed the person from the public eye before using spit and applying it to the person's eyes or tongue before healing them. Jesus' tenderness is mentioned when he took the blind man by his hand and led him away from the crowds and then stayed with him until his sight was completely restored. He took the time that was needed. (4)

Jesus saw the crippled woman in Luke 13:11-13. Jesus saw the man who had been lame and blind for 38 years in John 5:1-9. Jesus saw the man with dropsy in Luke 14:1-4. Jesus saw the man blind from birth in John 9:1-9. In Mark 10:46-52 Jesus heard the blind man's cry above the noisy crowd. In all these cases it was Jesus who saw or heard the individual first.

There were also times when Jesus healed a person and used the opportunity to teach many. In Matt. 12:10-13, a man with a shriveled hand was present while Jesus was being challenged by the Pharisees for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus told the man to stretch out his hand and he completely restored it. Another time in Luke 13:11-13 Jesus was teaching in the temple when he called forward a woman who had been crippled for 18 years. Telling her he was setting her free from her infirmity, he put his hands on her and healed her. In Luke 14:1-4 Jesus was at a Pharisee's home when he saw a man with dropsy. He asked those present if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, and when no one answered, he healed the man. Jesus knew that a disability in a person's life had teaching value, and he made use of the opportunity to teach as many as he could when the time was right, and he did so in an appropriate, respectful way.

Jesus understood that God's power could be witnessed in the life of a person with a disability. When the man born blind in John 9 was asked by the disciples who had sinned, this man or his parents, Jesus' reply was that it was so God's work in the man's life could be displayed. It's not hard to imagine the powerful stories being shared over and over again at family gatherings, or the breathless, whispered accounts of unanticipated, dramatic healing told around camp fires or along country roads. The changed lives could not be denied. The rejoicing could not be squelched!

In Luke 14:12-24 Jesus told the parable about the man who held a great banquet and when those who were invited didn't come, he gathered the disabled from the streets to enjoy his feast. Several points can be taken from this illustration. There are many who have rejected God's invitation to enter into a relationship with him. The parable of the Great Banquet makes it clear that the disabled have a sure invitation to come to him and enjoy all that he has prepared. All who believe in Jesus are full members of His Kingdom. For the disabled individual who chooses to believe, God's kingdom is fully theirs. (5) Another important principle: Jesus knew that those who were gathered from the streets and the alleys-the lame, the blind, the deaf - were the people who could not reciprocate. He was teaching those around – and us today, the Church – that the disabled give us the truest opportunity for Christ-like servant hood. This means service done with pure motivation, unwavering faithfulness and "outside-the-box" willingness.

When John the Baptist's disciples were sent to ask Jesus if he was the one or should they wait for another in Luke 7:21-22, Jesus' reply indicates how significant his ministry to the disabled was. "Go and tell John what you see

and hear, that the blind see, the deaf hear and the lame walk". Jesus' healing ministry to the many disabled individuals that came or were brought to him was his testimony to the work that he was Messiah. (6)

Jesus is our greatest example of how we are to minister to the disabled in our world. He is our Perfect Model. We have seen it all through the Gospels where he took the time to speak with and really hear their concerns. He touched them and had compassion on them. Sometimes words were not needed, just the loving help of a friend. All this he did while respecting them and protecting their pride. In several situations we saw the importance Jesus placed on the spiritual well-being of those he ministered to. In fact he considered a person's spiritual condition far more important than their debilitating condition. He knew their need for forgiveness and the Savior. Jesus knew that whether healed or not, the disabled person's life could reflect the mighty power of God. And he bestowed on them the privilege of being used by God to speak to an unbelieving world the truth that He was the Messiah. We are to take his attitudes and his actions and with the power of the Holy Spirit, we are to be Jesus to the disabled in our world.

1. Barrier-Free Friendships by Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Jensen, "Imitating Christ in Friendship", Zondervan Publishing House, 1997. p. 41.
2. The Hurdler, "Sight to See" by Larry Patton, Hurdling Handicaps Speaking Ministries, P.O. Box 725023, Berkley, Michigan 48072 Spring, 2007.
3. Special Needs, Special Ministry by Jim Pierson, Louise Tucker Jones and Pat Verbal. "Jesus' Heart For People With Special Needs", Group Publishing, 2004, p.39.
4. Suffering and the Sovereignty of God, "How to Respond to Tragedy" by John Piper, Desiring God 2005 National Conference, October 7-9,2005, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
5. People With Disabilities: A Biblical Perspective by Robert T. Henry, The Christian and Missionary Alliance, 2001, p.38.
6. Ibid., p. 31.

KMA/Beyond Suffering/fall, 2013