

Medicine: A Parable for the Gospel

Watermark Medical Ministry, November 2009

Introduction

This is what I am aiming to accomplish together with you today:

1. Help lay some of the theological groundwork for us as we work out what it is that this medical ministry ought to look like
2. Specifically I want to help us locate Medicine within the Glorious Gospel Mission of God.
3. Work through a few basic questions: What is God's main purpose? What then is our main purpose? In light of those answers, what is medicine *for*? And finally, then what are some practical implications for us as we form this medical ministry group?

Part I: What is God's main purpose? What is God up to, after all?

So let's start with a foundational question; the kind that if we get wrong, then we end up getting everything wrong.

There is a poignant moment in John's Gospel where Jesus prays to his father as the moment of his great sacrifice is fast approaching. It is in chapter 17, and we typically call this the "high priestly prayer" of Jesus. It is an amazing prayer, where we get an inside view of the interworking of the Trinity, and God let's us in on his deepest desires.

"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave

me to do. 5 And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.
John 17:1-4.

Recall Todd Wagner's depiction of the Trinity - Three Persons and One God - all lovingly exalting and promoting and submitting to one another. And this love spilled over into creation, like love always does - bursting out and drawing all of creation back into love with Himself.

God's main purpose, then, as stated clearly in the Jesus' "insider" prayer, is the magnification and delight in his own triune self. And the very three-person-in-one nature of God protects this purpose from devolving into narcissism.

The story of the Bible is not the story of man, it's not even primarily the story of God's rescue of man (though of course this is a significant subplot), it is the story of the Father's promotion of the Son and the Spirit, and the story of the Son's promotion of the Father and the Spirit, and the story of the Spirit's promotion of them both. **The Bible is the story of the Trinitarian God manifesting and explaining and declaring His own Glory and worth. And what is supposed to happen is for us to see all of that playing out and and get caught up in it and exalt in it.**

How does that sit with you? I challenge you by admonishing that one of the ways you can gauge your own maturity in this journey of the Christian faith is the degree to which your heart leaps at the thought of God being greatly glorified. If that idea falls completely flat on you, that is a concerning sign - for the enlightened, born-again Christian soul is designed to sing to the glory of God.

The Bible contains the best example of how this works out: Recall the story of John the Baptist hearing of the success of Jesus' ministry in John 3:29-30

"The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease."

This life is not our wedding, it is not our show. It is God's - and that should bring us tremendous joy, just as it does for the best man at his best friend's wedding.

It is then our greatest joy to find our delight in the exaltation of God. And this brings us to our next question...

Part II: What is *our* main purpose? What is the chief end of man?

Many of you have heard of the Westminster Confession's answer to that question:

*The Chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (altered a bit by John Piper to "glorify God **by** enjoying him forever").*

I whole-heartedly agree - but *how* do we bring him glory?

We know Christ's great commission at the end of Matthew. It is for sure a clear expression of our mission on earth. But its familiarity may breed apathy at times.

I'm going to share two bits of scripture that help me most here. One of them you could consider the "internists" version because it is deeper and less direct and the other is more the "surgeon's" version because it is more clear and short and direct.

John 21:15-19 (Jesus and Peter)

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you

know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.

2 Cor 5:16-20 (Paul’s ministry of Reconciliation).

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.

So it’s not just about standing around, holding hands, and singing Holy, Holy, Holy--He has actually provided us a WAY to glorify Him - by “feeding his sheep” which Paul helps to clarify as announcing and proclaiming and teaching and discipling with the Gospel - the death and resurrection of Christ.

Here’s how I would state it tonight, here’s what I should start out my day, every day, aiming to accomplish:

With all delight, I seek to exalt and bring Glory to my God by proclaiming and manifesting the Great Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I bring God the most glory and myself the most satisfaction by most clearly and most effectively and most rightly proclaiming and manifesting the Gospel. This is what I live for, this is what brings me the most joy, that is my every day.

Part III: So then, what is Medicine *for*? How does medicine fit into our main purpose?

Most of that is just a review of what basic Christianity, taught from the pulpit and written in many of the books we read. But the real point of this talk, and the larger work we as a medical group need to do, is to realize and see

how exactly our purpose in medicine fits up into this larger purpose of God and the purpose he has given his people. Put simply, how does medicine exalt and bring Glory to God by manifesting and proclaiming the Great Gospel of Jesus Christ?

The amazing truth is that no profession, short of vocational ministry itself, is so fit to manifest and proclaim the Gospel as medicine. Even people who do not believe in God and Jesus are in fact manifesting the Gospel in some truncated form when they act as healers.

How is this? First, let's be clear of what medicine is at a foundational level. Medicine is the intersection of two greater realities: sickness and healing. Medicine is the application of healing to the sick; it is the restoration of the broken.

--So first, we have to understand what sickness is, where it comes from, and most importantly what deeper truth it is pointing to.

My interaction with sick people, particularly Christians, has revealed a deep confusion on this. I find that most Christians think sickness is some kind of evil brought on by an outside force - either nature or Satan.

But sickness originally entered into human history as a design from God. The beginning of the Bible, Genesis chapter 3, makes it painfully and shamefully clear that part of God's curse against mankind for its unfaithful and adulterous rebellion against him was the promise that man will die - "to dust you shall return." So sickness, as the means through which death so often comes, is necessarily part of this curse.

No doubt your heart is bristling at this thought, since so much of modern American Christianity never mentions this very clear and basic teaching of the Faith (this has not always been the case, just take a look at the prayers of earlier generations of Christians - generations that dealt with death and sickness on a much wider scale than we do - to see how lost we have become in terms of understanding sickness).

Sickness, then, originates in God as right and just punishment for a rebellious humanity. But the character of our God, as full of mercy as justice, uses justice to serve another end - our rescue.

Very early in the history of Israel, God set up a pattern of wrath, repentance, restoration (see Deuteronomy chapter 30) - one that survives today, as a means of rescue. The wrath is designed to display God's right and holy justice, but it also serves as the means through which he prepares the human heart for returning and repentance.

And sickness, as all calamities, can be understood as serving the heart for grace. Sickness, then is a *sign* of our deeper sinfulness and need for repentance.

Sickness basically functions like the ministry of John the Baptist - remember what he said when crowds came out to visit him, "You Brood of Vipers? Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

Sickness prepares the way of the Lord. The Lord brings grace and mercy; but grace and mercy does not *work* unless the recipient has a broken and contrite heart.

Remember the prostitute who anointed Jesus with the expensive perfume in front of the proud and astounded gathering of men? Remember how Jesus chastised the critical Pharisee when she did it? "He who is forgiven little, loves little." The problem with the Pharisee's heart was that it was not broken.

Sickness is one of the means God uses to break the heart.

There is one very crucial text in this regard, one that all medical providers must know and understand deeply: Luke 13:1-5.

Jesus asked about an act of terrorism committed against the Jews, where Pilate killed some and mixed their blood with their sacrifices - you can't get much more offensive. Christ's response is massively important for us in health care to understand: "unless you repent you will all likewise perish." Whoa! They were looking to see if particular evil actions come to particular

people as a result of their own sins. Jesus answer is no, but he immediately turns and condemns us all!

This is how it works out for me practically: *my patient's sickness ought to bring me to repentance.* When I am faced with massive tragedy in medicine, my heart ought to go where Nehemiah's did when he heard of the disarray in Jerusalem - to my knees in repentance. Why? because I know that sickness is in my patient's life because of the corporate and universal sinfulness of mankind, of which I am a part, a participating member in the rebellion.

It's like we all have HIV, only some people are really sick and the rest of us are just on the pathway to sickness.

So we have in sickness the crucial prep work of the Gospel - we have a *sign* of the bad news, so to speak.

--Next, we have to understand what healing is a sign for:

This ought to be the easy one, but all too often we see God in healing but fail to see what he is revealing to us through healing.

Fundamentally, healing is a sign pointing to the grace and mercy of God. More specifically, healing is a sign pointing to the deeper healing of our real illness (sin) available only in Christ.

Recall the story in Matt 9 about the friends of the paralytic who lowered him in front of Jesus to be healed. First Jesus forgave his sins, and when that gets everyone all riled up, he makes this massive statement that ought to be branded on every physician's heart:

"that you may know that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins."

That is what healing is about. It is a sign, just as it was for Jesus in almost all of his physical healings. It is a sign pointing to a much deeper and more crucial healing - the healing of our hopelessly sinful hearts.

I must bring up something else crucial here, something that may be contentious for some of you, and that is the *how* of the Gospel. How does this deeper healing that physical healing is supposed to point to really work?

We must realize that our sickness is a *just* punishment. Our sinfulness is too great to be taken away freely. We have, both individually and corporately, committed an infinitely horrible crime, a Capital crime of the highest order, and so the punishment from a just God needs be fitting. If God were to just heal people outright, then he would be unfaithful to his own justice.

This reality brings us straight to the heart of the Gospel. God had to let those sicknesses play out, he had to let them lead to death, and that had to happen to a human, since it was humanity that had betrayed God. From Isa 53:

*But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed. this sets up the solution, and
helps put in context those glorious words from Isaiah:*

The Gospel is that Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, has taken on our sicknesses, has suffered them himself. And he took them all down into the grave; and after defeating them, after appropriately exhausting the just curse of God as our human representative, he then rose, free of sickness and promising us that we will share in that same new and illness-free life after our own resurrection.

But if we miss the depth of our sin underneath and behind the sickness, then we will not be sufficiently set up in our hearts for the full impact of the Gospel that Jesus' death on our behalf is meant to elicit.

--So now we can finally put it all together.

This is how medicine is a parable for the Gospel: physical sickness is the bad news, a sign from God that something is desperately wrong with us;

and physical healing that comes through our medical efforts points to the good news, it is a sign that despite our deserving to be sick, God has made a way to heal us *in Christ*.

Sickness is the just wrath of God and Healing is the unmerited grace of God - the Gospel in physical form.

The point, then, of healing, is not merely to restore physical broken-ness; but to reveal the grace of God, and that glorious grace is the power and means to heal something much more significant than physical brokenness-- but also the root of that brokenness, the sinful and idolatrous human heart.

So now returning to the point of all of our lives, individually and collectively - to magnify and glorify God by proclaiming and manifesting the Gospel of Jesus Christ:

In medicine we are handed a fantastic tool, a parable, an illustration, that plays out along side the lives of our patients, through which we can more clearly and physically demonstrate the Gospel.

This should make our hearts jump. The Gospel is so often told as a cold and dead set of propositions - declared on a neighbor's front door, suspended with no context and not linked to any reality in life.

But not so in medicine. Our patients' sicknesses are real life issues that contextualize the Gospel like few events in life can do. The truth of the Gospel, the truth of what their sickness ought to point them towards (their need for repentance); and the truth of what your healing ought to point them towards (the Grace of God) - can be contextualized into something that can be grasped. And we are the ones right there in the midst of everything who can do it!

Part IV: Some practical implications:

No doubt, the implications medicine as a parable of the glorious Gospel has innumerable implications, I will lay out the few that are most apparent to me:

1. Given that Medicine is a parable for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Christian Health Care Professionals will fully integrate the Gospel into their practices. I'm going to need to spend some time here, because everything we all have been taught pushes hard against this:

If someone asks you to not bring your Christian Faith into your practice, they are asking you to do a massive compromise of what you believe. I have not been arguing that medicine merely provides a unique opportunity to share the Gospel, as if we kind of slip it in when people feel bad. What I am arguing is that the very design of medicine, the very point of it, is to physically manifest the Gospel. We do not have a choice here. You miss this, and you are missing the reason God put you in medicine in the first place.

What else do we think God could be up to in medicine? He allows and brings sickness to turn the heart back to repentance; he allows and brings healing to give a visual of His mercy; and then he trains and puts you, one of his priests, right down in the middle of these moments --and you are *not* going to go ahead and make the full connection to the Gospel that God is begging for us all to see right there?

If they are not a believer, there is not a Todd Wagner to call and make sense of their sickness. There is not a community group. It's YOU. Don't miss this.

Example: when the patient says, "Hey thanks, doc..." or even "Why is this happening?..." or "This is so hard..." you can respond:

"You know behind physical sickness is God getting our attention, yours and mine, that we all, as a human race, are suffering from a much deeper and worse illness - sinfulness and rebellion against a Good and Faithful and Holy God"

And behind the healing I am working towards, behind my efforts, is the grace and mercy of God that is not satisfied to leave us in this place of sickness.

This whole thing, the sickness and the healing, is like a parable to help us see our brokenness and need for repentance and returning to him, and his desire to find a way to give it.

In fact, it is really pointing towards the clearest expression of these truths - that whole Jesus story, when God became a man and died on the cross, experiencing the full brunt of human suffering. And the Christian belief is that when he did it, he actually took on our sufferings, including the ones you are experiencing right now, and buried them in the grave. And then when he rose from the dead, he was making available a promise that ultimately, in the end, it's possible to rise out of sickness and death into a new life that is whole and healthy and restored.

So that's just how deep the love of God is behind my doctoring of you--pointing towards his willingness to take on your sickness, taking on the punishment we all deserve, and then giving us a new and whole and perfect body.

Healing may or may not come on this side of the grave for you, but Jesus' Resurrection is the massive promise that for those of us who trust in him, it WILL come on the other side of the grave."

2. Christian Health Care Providers, understanding the depths of their own sinfulness and the marvelous grace of God in Christ, will be physicians of incomparable compassion. We will hurt and weep with those who are hurting. This is crucial. If you are going to go ahead and move into explaining the spiritual elements underneath sickness, you have to feel that you are suffering from the same basic illness; otherwise you become one of the worst kind of monsters at these moments (you become a judge who blames people for their sickness) and ruin any chance of sharing the grace and love of God.
3. Christian Health Care Providers will be relentless pursuers of healing on behalf of their patients

For students and really for all of us, this means that your medical studies are incredibly serious and important--not at all because they are necessary for your own self-promotion as they were for most of us in medical school, but because both your desire and your capacity to heal are direct signs of God's mercy and Grace.

But you also pray, and pray, and pray. You exercise every spiritual gift that God may so graciously grant--working out the power of the Spirit in you on behalf of your patients, as a way of still more manifesting the Glory of God.

4. Christian Health Care Providers will be unyielding defenders of the image of God in the lives of the sick and broken.

Abortion? How did this happen to our profession under our watch? After all, it is doctors who perform abortions. Why is the battle against abortion fought outside of the AMA (American Medical Association) and the ACOG (American College of Gynecologists)? Why don't doctors use their sizable influence in this arena more? Physicians are the closest to the heart of the problem, and yet as a group furthest from doing anything about it.

And all of those other areas you were taught not to enter into as a health care professional - those are exactly the ones God is calling you to enter into and offer his light. When a woman comes in seeking an abortion, or looking for birth control to justify fornication, or needing treatment for a sexually transmitted disease - who is going to love her enough to guide her through those situations under the teachings and mercy of God if not you? Who will explain to the young man with gonorrhea that he is sinning not only against some young woman, but against the God who has called him to be a protector and husband to women - if not you?

But defending the life of the unborn and dealing with sexually transmitted disease is really just the most obvious and easy part of our job. Who else is better positioned than health care professionals to discover the most broken and abandoned of society? The twenty-something quadriplegic who leaves the hospital with a sliver of a discharge plan after breaking her neck - we all know she is going home to languish with many bed sores in her future. If we, who know the dangers and are present

during the initial treatments of her medical conditions, if we do not stop into the role of taking responsibility for her overall health, who will?

How is it that physicians groups have come to be more about advocating for the privileges of physicians rather than advocating for the health of their communities? When tort reform becomes more important to the physician community than the health of the public we serve, we can be sure we have veered far off track.

It is not primarily the job of the government or even the church to identify and advocate for the sick and the dying, but it is the health care community, who God has committed the responsibility of the defenders of life, to be the advocates for the health of their towns and cities.

5. Christian Health Care Professionals will always be seeking the most clear and powerful way of manifesting the Gospel through medicine - which in the end is always to share it the way Jesus did - by seeking out the most broken and sacrificing ourselves for their sake.

The reality, as I have already stated, is that we are all under the right and just curse of God for our participation in the Devil's mutiny. But somehow our evil hearts allow us to justify ourselves, seeing others as unworthy of God's love, but oddly seeing ourselves as deserving of it.

Part of the way in which God breaks this proud and self-inflicted spell is to target his grace on those who are most clearly unworthy of it. When the proud see the unworthy receiving the blessings of God, it shames them, and perhaps provides the best opportunity for them to finally recognize their own sinfulness.

But even more important than this design of the Gospel, is God's intention to elevate the value and worth of his Son through it. God does not simply want the gospel proclaimed in any fashion, he wants it proclaimed in a way that brings the most glory and honor to his Son; and by displaying the Gospel as having the power to heal and transform even the most sick among us, Christ is seen in all his transformative and glorious power.

What this means for us as Christian health care professionals, whose main purpose is to make clear the Gospel through medicine, is that we will relentlessly seek out the most needy, the most sick, the patients who no one else wants to care for - either because they are too difficult, or because they don't "deserve" it.

This will set us in the complete opposite direction of our medical culture - which from our school days has put us on a trajectory to seek out the most deserving, most able to pay, most responsible, and ironically the most healthy of all patients. How else, after all, will we be able to pay off our debts and make a decent living. The sick and broken are for residency training.

Not so for us. *We must not let ourselves be drawn into the ridiculous cultural pull to an easy medicine for the healthiest people.* We know that the Gospel is most clear when we are most focused on the most sick and broken, and so we seek them and find them and bring them physical healing while all the time pointing them to the great and glorious healer whom we are trying to emulate.

Hear me, dear Christian Health Care Professional. You will be held to account, not just for your diligence in medical choices, but for your right proclamation of the full and robust Gospel of God in the face of the human tragedy you encounter day after day. It is no accident that he has placed you, his Kingdom of Priests, right in the heart of the suffering and sicknesses of the people he is calling to himself. He is calling you to speak his truth into these moments--to offer the Gospel, the explanation of how sickness is rooted in the God-belittling lives we all live and that physical healing is rightly to be understood as a sign pointing to the unmerited grace to those who would trust Jesus.

We are to be the means for God to bring so much more than a healed body, we are the means through which God can bring a restored soul, that relishes and is fully satisfied in the goodness and glory of the God it was always made to worship. This is what God is after in us.

This is the glorious calling that God has placed on our lives: to be a pointer to a truth far more stupendous than any healing you will ever bring to pass, whether through the clever use of antibiotics or the power of prayer. Do not

settle for anything less. Indeed, rejoice that we have been called to such a glorious participation in the demonstration of the grace of God.

Pursue these truths. Relentlessly pursue the questions that I have raised in this talk. Be diligent in working out what it really looks like to be a physician Christian, and ever desire to be more fully satisfied in the God you were made to love.

My vision for the Christian Health Care Professionals of Dallas is that we would rise to this great and glorious call, to take leadership over the health of our city, our community, and even internationally, that we would see ourselves as the Gospel Proclaimers who God has called us to be, taking every opportunity to manifest the Glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ through the medium of Medicine.