

Sin And Sickness

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. 18 And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit. 19 Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, 20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:13-20)

As we consider the words of this passage, we have encountered some instructions that are both difficult and demanding, words that most preachers seem often to intentionally pass right on by, moving quickly on to the next passage. And why do they do that? It often seems to be because they think that their congregations would want them to do exactly that, to quickly pass on by such words.

But we really must not do that with any of God's precious words of instruction and truth. And so, while I don't presume to know all of God's intention for these words, and I also recognize that we, as a church, will probably be reluctant to put some of these teachings into practice, we nevertheless must go ahead and deal with them.

So then, may we begin with a question? How willing would each of us be to bare our sinful soul and our conscience before other brethren within this church. Because, as we have just read, there are times and circumstances when God recommends that we do exactly that, to confess some of our most difficult of "besetting sins" before our brothers and sisters in Christ, and then ask them to pray fervently that we be forgiven of those sins and be set free from the power

and the control that those sins have over both our behaviors and over our health. Again, this truly is a difficult and demanding consideration.

Here also, God has deliberately intermingled this factor of "sin", into the equation of "sickness" and "illness" and "disease", inferring that there are times and circumstances when our "sicknesses" are directly or indirectly related to, or even caused by, sinful behavior.

But as we know, it is not comfortable to us, as a culture of people, to link these two together, to admit that our behavior causes some of our bad health, that "sin" and "sickness" can and do often come out from the same source.

But in His omniscient understanding, God knew that these days would come when we, as a society, would be reticent to call sin and sin's effects, "sin", that we would find ways to dress-up some of our most besetting of sins in other clothing and call them something that will "look better" to us and to our friends.

And our culture has done exactly that with some of what I will, for our purposes today, call "willfully chosen" habits and addictions, the most common being the misuse of drugs and alcohol. And yes, there are also a myriad of other "willfully chosen" behaviors that also can cause "disease" and "sickness" within our bodies, especially those involving sexual misbehavior, causing venereal diseases, AIDS, and the like.

And yes, the lingering effects of so many of these "sicknesses" will also cause broken relationships, broken homes and broken families.

But clearly within these scriptures before us today and many other scriptures like them, God is telling us that we should not hide our sins behind some "more acceptable disguise", such as the words, "sickness" or "illness" or "disease", that no matter how we try to make sin look better, sin is still sin, and we need to treat it as such.

But again, over these recent several decades, there has been an ever-increasing insistence from those people and those organizations that shape the "voice" of our culture, that we intentionally label some of our "willfully chosen"

behaviors using those names, of “illness” or “sickness” or “disease”, and that we remove any and all stigma of “wrongness”, or what we Christians call “sin”, from them and from their treatment.

Simply put, the “voice” of our culture insists that these two elements, “sin” and “sickness” not be directly related. And again, that is true whether a person’s illness be physical, emotional or mental. Our culture’s leaders demand that all of these “willfully chosen” health conditions be called “illness” or “disease” or “sickness”, and that their causes be attributed to the person’s circumstances, with no personal accountability being attributed to the person’s behaviors.

Now, with that being said, may I quickly affirm that by far, most all of the sicknesses, illnesses and diseases that people endure come to them through sources other than sinful behavior, sources such as injuries, or through diseases that were passed to them through contagions like viruses and germs.

And then also, many of our sicknesses come to us through genetic predispositions. And God does deal with all those sicknesses and diseases here in these words also.

With myself and my family, my mother and two sisters had cancer and each one died from their cancer. And I have fully expected, at any time, for myself to be diagnosed with cancer. It is the way of that kind of disease.

But my father had another kind of what today’s diagnosticians call a “disease”. He was an “alcoholic”. And please understand that I do not share these words about my father to dishonor him in any way, but simply to give some truthful facts about him.

Again, he was an alcoholic. And his form of alcoholism was of a particularly difficult kind. Because with only one drink, he would seemingly lose all of his ability to control his anger, and he would become violent and dangerous.

When he did not drink, he behaved in ordinary ways, doing good and right things with his family and friends. But once he chose to take even one drink, everything seemed to go wrong, his mental and emotional faculties would

change, and he would become like a different person. And as a result, he spent several years in prison for his deeds done while under the influence of alcohol.

The question again, using only the truths we read within these scriptures, was my Dad's problem a "disease", or was it "sin", or was it perhaps both of those factors working together to produce a wrong behavior.

Again, using the tenets of these scriptures, it seems to be most plausible that a combination of the two, "disease" and "sin", were involved. "Sin" being the first step, my Dad willfully drinking alcohol when he knew that it would bring about his wrong behavior. And then the physical and emotional effects brought on by some defect in his DNA, to produce the "perfect storm" that then brought about a very, very difficult life for him, as well as for us as his family. Sinful behavior when combined with physical, emotional and mental problems can cause most any person to do things they should not do.

May I pause for a moment and remind us again of some of the truths we are examining here today . . . verses 15 and 16.

¹⁵And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (James 5:15-16)

And then in verse 19

¹⁹My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:19-20)

Please know that it is not the intent of this message to cast undue doubt on the diagnoses of our medical professionals regarding the health difficulties that people often suffer, whether their suffering be physical, emotional or mental. My hope instead is that we would understand that God is telling us in these words that the two, "sin" and "sickness" are sometimes, perhaps more often than we would like to admit, related and may have connected causes. And

that we really do need to deal with the whole problem, that if there is sin involved, we must also deal with that sin.

But again, those people who shape the ideas and philosophies in our culture today, including many within the organized church, seem more and more to be insisting that we believe and accept that physical or emotional “sickness”, and matters of moral behavior, “sin”, are not related and that they must be kept separate and apart from one another in our thinking.

I confess that I know very little about that portion of the healthcare industry that deals with emotional and mental “illness”. But I do know that they adamantly insist that no stigma of sin or guilt ever be associated with their patient’s difficulties. It is one of those “protected grounds” that even our churches are more and more often being prohibited from encroaching upon.

But for today, may I at least speak about some of the most obvious of the “willfully chosen” disorders that our culture commonly calls “illness” or “disease”, those of alcoholism and drug addiction. And it seems that the primary reason for our culture’s insistence on those monikers is to minimize the guilt experienced by the one who is said to be “sick”.

Over recent years, our government has also joined in with the culture and has passed many stringent laws that require us as individuals, and especially the businesses, to call those and other “willfully chosen” behaviors, “illnesses” and “diseases”. And unfortunately, some of us common folk, like you and me, accept and support those notions, especially when it has to do with us personally, or with someone that we love, our spouse or our children or grandchildren.

But again, it seems from these words of scripture that God would have us, His believing children, to take a “biblical view” of those kinds of “illnesses” and “diseases”, and to respond to them from the view given by Him here in these scriptures.

With that being said, what are we to do? Again, the most obvious connections can be made in those “willfully chosen” kinds of lifestyles where bad habits show their evidence, the ashen pallor of a drug addict or alcoholic, the cold absence

of life and absence of purpose in their eyes, their sometimes frenzied, sometimes sluggish mannerisms, their disobedient and argumentative responses, all speak a loud message of slow destruction taking place, their sinful behavior having wrought great affliction and sickness in their physical and emotional lives.

Again, as with my father, he was not only addicted to alcohol, but with the science we have recently learned about DNA, it seems clear that his predisposition towards alcoholism also contained within it a condition in which the chemicals within only one drink of alcohol would trigger another predisposition, this one towards anger and violence, the one precipitating the other.

And I believe that I also have that same predisposition passed along to me from my Dad's DNA. So, my personal response must be that I must not drink even one drink of alcohol. And under those circumstances, I am convinced that if I willfully or carelessly choose to drink, it is "sinful" behavior on my part.

And yes, I would be called "legalistic" by some people, but be that as it may, these scriptures tell me that if I believe some behavior to be sin to me, and I still do it, then I have sinned. (Romans 14:23)

Thinking back on my years in the ministry at French Camp, I have known many students that had endured daily emotional suffering through no fault or sin of their own, but because their parents were regular abusers of drugs and alcohol.

And also, I have known of other students who through no fault or sin of their own, have endured daily emotional suffering brought about by sexual abuse that came from within their own families.

So then, for myself, I must conclude that contrary to the teachings of our culture, "sin" and "sickness" may sometimes, even often, be very related, either directly or indirectly. And in order to begin to comfort and to cure some of those people affected, "sin" must be pulled out from its hiding place and firmly dealt with.

And here in these words, God reduces some of the cure and treatment for these problems down to a few simple measures. He doesn't tell us here to go ye into all the world and make people stop doing all those awful things they do. No, He tells us instead to begin simply and personally with faith, and with prayer, and especially within our own churches.

And yes, I know that many, many who hear these words will protest and argue that the problems just aren't that simple. But folks, it has to begin somewhere, and God's truth in these scriptures is the best place to start.

His remedy begins with our coming to His healing fountain of Christ in surrender, and there, He will begin to work His cure in us, both for the pain and suffering, and also for the washing away of the sins that are causing our problems.

And yes, it will often involve a long and drawn-out over and over surrender, both for the ones who are suffering from their sinful behaviors, and also for the families that love them. But this truly is the place to begin.

We must, as individuals, and as a church, set aside all our usual propensity to be "judgmental", and instead replace that attitude with the humility of fervent prayer for the healing of those who are suffering.

And when the problem is within our own body and soul, we must begin by recognizing our own wretched sinfulness and the sickness that it might be causing within us. And we must seek for and depend upon prayerful intercession from our brethren within the congregation.

And yes, that can potentially be very embarrassing to those of us who desire to keep our sins very private. Public confession of sin is a nearly impossible thing for most of us to do. But again, if healing is to take place, biblical suffering will also need to take place. This is what a church, a body of believers, should be all about, restoring and reconciling broken souls back to Christ.

I hope to continue with some of these thoughts next week, but we must close for now!

Again yes, these words of scripture are ever-so difficult. But God will be generous to anyone who obeys His commands. Consider these words from Psalm 119 as we close.

⁷¹It was good for me to be afflicted, (Oh God)
so that I might learn your decrees. (Psalm 119:71)

May we pray!