

Learning To Love One Another

by Geoff Preston (1947-2013)

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*"By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." —
John 13:35*

In a June 2000 sermon titled "What Does God Really Want? (Part Five)," John Ritenbaugh expounded in relation to Romans 8:28 ("And we know that all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose"):

All the events of life, all of the things that come within our possession and as part of our responsibility, are given to us for the sake of good. They are given to us so that through them the right things can be carried through the grave. This includes what we might consider bad things. Even things like poor health can be a good thing in terms of what God is doing with us, even though on the outside it looks like it's bad. If God is in your life, then even that sickness (though we might consider it bad), is good. It's part of the scaffolding for building character.

From my personal experience, and from looking around the church today, it appears that many of our brethren are *not* being healed. It could cause us to ask, "Why is God not healing His people today?" Of course, we know that many people have been healed miraculously—and some from terrible diseases—yet others die or continue in suffering and pain.

Does this mean that the ones who are not being healed are more sinful than those who have been healed? Definitely not! If it were a matter of sin, no one would be healed, "For," as Romans 3:23 says, "all have sinned and all fall short of the glory of God." The Bible condemns all sin, so it has nothing to do with whether we have sinned more than the other fellow or not.

What then? Does God show favor to one man over another? Again, we have to turn to Scripture for the answer. In Matthew 5:45, Jesus plainly says, "He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." God is no respecter of persons (Deuteronomy 10:17; Romans 2:11).

Yet, from Isaiah 53:5, we know that it is not God's intention for man to be sick: "by His stripes we are healed." This is a promise made in the present tense, making it always applicable. In addition, Psalm 103:2-3 encourages us, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases."

We know and obey the instruction to call upon the elders when we are sick as the apostle James says in James 5:14: "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."

So why are some of us not being healed?

Working Out a Plan

We seem to be witnessing an unprecedented proportion of people who have terminal diseases. Various cancers, heart disease, diabetes, and a variety of other problems cause severe trial and discomfort to the bodies of many of our brethren, stressing and devastating them and their families too. In my personal case, as I suffer pain and sleeplessness, I see the deep worry and concern—a kind of mental and emotional pain—in my wife's eyes as she cares for me.

Has God left us alone to suffer? Never! Being a loving God, He wants us to be well and happy, and He gives us many guidelines in His Word on how to apply His wonderful way of living so we can be that way. But, to be painfully honest, how many of us have ourselves set these problems into motion long before we came to understand the revealed truth of God?

At one time or another in our lives, most of us have gone out and had a little too much fun. How many of us smoked for years, or drank way beyond what was good for us? We probably stayed up far too many nights burning the midnight oil, and it is likely we ate the wrong things, and to excess. There are many ways to injure the human body, and the consequences may not become apparent for many years.

Nor should we forget that some people become sick through hereditary weakness, whose fathers' sins are being visited upon them (Exodus 20:5). For others, there is no apparent reason at all for their illness, and perhaps for them not knowing why is the hardest burden to bear.

God, however, lovingly supplies a means to help us to cope with the trial of disease and to grow in character at the same time. James 5:16 says, "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." Serious illness can force an afflicted person to develop a very real reliance on God. In addition, it also reveals a duty of the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ to pray for the sick person. Why should they do this? James 5:16 continues, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."

What a wonderful assurance this is for the sick church member, who may not have the strength or awareness to do much praying, although we all do the best we can at such times. Sometimes, because of pain, nausea, lack of sleep, and many other problems associated with ill health, the suffering person is not as clear-minded as a healthy person, and he is thankful that there is another who is willing to stand by him and pray for him.

All the while God is working out a wonderful plan for all of us as we stand with our brethren in sickness, whether we are the "patient," the worried relation, or the person giving moral and spiritual support from far away. An amazing thing begins to happen: A bond—a relationship—forms. And God can often work through these bonds to bring about real love, understanding, encouragement, and growth.

More Blessed to Give

For those who have never been critically sick, it may be hard to imagine what the ill person is going through, and one may even hesitate when it comes to praying for him. However, this should not be an obstacle. Paul instructs us that we can go before our loving Father and admit this, asking Him to help us pray more effectively. He knows everything, and His Holy Spirit will make up for our lack of understanding, if we are willing to ask in faith. The apostle writes in Romans 8:26, "Likewise the Spirit also helps our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."

So what are we to learn from these things? What do we say to people who are suffering day in and day out, having their very lives altered because they have fallen sick and have not been healed?

Firstly, we have to recognize that God is sovereign and that His will and Word are final in our lives. No matter how bad it gets for any of us, He expects us to submit to Him—to say, "Your will be done," and to mean it.

This takes faith, which is one of the main character traits God is creating in His children. When all else looks as if it has failed, when it appears as if even God has deserted us, He expects us to have enough trust and confidence to know that is not true. We can place supreme reliance on His promise in Hebrews 13:5, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." He never breaks faith with us (I Corinthians 1:9).

Secondly, when His children pray for one another, they show that they really care, and God can use this to great advantage. For many who are sick or have been enduring sore trial, it is the hand that reaches out that illustrates or demonstrates God's tangible love toward them.

Just to receive a note, an email, a card, or a phone call is so encouraging and uplifting. A painful, terrible, dark day can be turned all of a sudden into sunshine, and even if it is just for a moment, the pain can dim and thankful prayer and praise can be offered to our loving Father for this gift, as small as it may seem. These little things mean so much to people who are cut off from others due to their illnesses, and just the fact that someone took the time out of his or her busy schedule to get in touch is so appreciated. It can make a huge difference to an afflicted person's day.

No one can truly imagine what someone else's pain and suffering is like, and that can make it difficult for a person to pick up the phone, send an email, or make any sort of personal contact. However, I know from experience that if the sender of such a communiqué receives as much encouragement as the recipient, then the former will be quite well-rewarded. In this vein, Paul quotes Jesus in Acts 20:35 as saying, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Our teenage son died some years ago, and I remember that on the first anniversary of his death, my wife and I were feeling very low. Yet, when I opened the mail, there was a thinking-of-you card from a young teenager who had been one of my son's friends. True, it caused the floodgates to burst, but it also helped us to heal a little that day. So, our loving concern should not stop with the sick, but should continue within us to reach out to those who have lost loved ones and are now alone.

Reaching Out

In I John 3:11, the aged apostle John, the one whom Jesus loved, tells us, "For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." *Webster's Dictionary* attempts to define biblical love by describing it as "the fatherly concern of God for humankind and man's devout attachment to God," as well as "the unselfish, loyal, and benevolent concern for the good of another."

Consider also Amos 3:3: "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" How does this apply to the present situation? With a unified willingness to understand and obey what Scripture demands of us as Christians, we can all walk together. Just because some are healthy—maybe they have never

had an illness in their lives—does not mean they cannot try to understand and empathize with their ill brethren. With the help of God's Holy Spirit, which will make up for what any one of us lacks, the healthy can reach out and make a difference in a sick person's life.

When an individual reaches out to another who is suffering, it uplifts and encourages so much that God's Spirit has an opportunity to work with them both, as well as to bring about comfort and a feeling of brotherhood to the ill person and to fan the flames of loving concern in the other. These glowing embers of God's love, brotherly Christian love, help the Family of God to form fuller, deeper bonds of unity and purpose.

This is not the only way God works to cultivate His love in His people, but where there is sickness and suffering, God can take advantage of the circumstance to teach us to love each other, a command He gave to His end-time church, and to walk together as brothers. Moreover, it also provides Him the opportunity to judge who really does love the brethren.

I have made many good friends through people reaching out in lovingkindness to me during my ongoing illness. I have never met most of these people, yet their love, kind words, cards, and emails keep me company in the long, lonely hours of the night. Their love has encouraged me to try a little harder the next day or has prompted me to be of good cheer and not become disheartened. It is inspiring to know that someone, a brother or sister now and in the time to come, is pulling for me and wanting me to succeed.

Above all, I know God sees these loving efforts being made and responds, pleased with our growth. He desires that we make a difference, and in reaching out, we learn to love one another—and in this world, that is making an uncommon difference.