

THE HEALTHY SOUL, PART 14: THE LOVE CURE
Matthew 9:35-36, Philippians 2:3-8, Selected Texts (NASB)
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As we approached Christmas during this present economic crisis a few years ago the media kept moaning that Americans just weren't spending enough on gifts. My first thought was that in an economic crisis, spending less is exactly what we should be doing. But, according to surveys, people were not actually planning to spend less. They were simply going to decrease the amount of increase they had been planning. The media started their drumbeat about how bad things were that the increase in Christmas spending was only a few hundred million dollars more than last year.

What does it mean that Americans were not actually planning to spend less at Christmas in the face of bankruptcies, foreclosures, negative savings, soaring personal debt, bank failures, emergency government bailouts, and rising unemployment? It means that in a materialistic culture the giving of gifts is about all that is left of Christmas for many people. If they don't give gifts, they don't have Christmas. This is a sad state of affairs since spending money on others is not automatically a sign of love.

A Christian perspective on giving is that we were all made to give love gifts to one another. How do I know? Follow this logic: One: the Bible says God is love. Two: the coming of the Son of God to earth is the biggest love gift the world has ever seen. Three: we were all made in the image of the God who is love. So if you want to have a healthy soul you must learn to activate your capacity to give love gifts by the grace of God. If you do not, you are like a horse that does not run, a bird that does not fly, or a fish that does not swim. Sometimes God's creatures cannot do what they have been made to do, but no one should call that healthy. If you were made to love, the only way to have a healthy soul is to learn to give love gifts as a way of life. The active expression of love is the practical cure for a sin-sick soul.

Because our culture has so misconstrued the meaning of love most of us would benefit from a concrete list of the behaviors of active love from God's perspective. I have compiled the following list of seven from Scripture in increasing order of significance.

FIRST DO NO HARM

First, it may seem unnecessary to say, but it is not foolish to realize that we need to start our journey into active love by becoming aware of when we are harming others. The phrase "first do no harm" has been part of the Hippocratic Oath taken by doctors for centuries. Listen to what Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah: **"BEHOLD, MY SERVANT WHOM I HAVE CHOSEN; MY BELOVED IN WHOM MY SOUL is WELL-PLEASED; I WILL PUT MY SPIRIT UPON HIM, AND HE SHALL PROCLAIM JUSTICE TO THE GENTILES. HE WILL NOT QUARREL, NOR CRY OUT; NOR WILL ANYONE HEAR HIS VOICE IN THE STREETS. A BATTERED REED HE WILL NOT BREAK OFF, AND A SMOLDERING WICK HE WILL NOT PUT OUT, UNTIL HE LEADS JUSTICE TO VICTORY. AND IN HIS NAME THE GENTILES WILL HOPE"** (Matthew 12:18-21, caps in original).

We are the "**battered reed**" that Christ will not break off. We are the "**smoldering wick**" that he will not snuff out. Because of our sin we are dead where we stand, yet he has treated us with patience and kindness in order to move us to repentance. This is a picture of the kindness and care with which God expects us to treat other people. The first step in learning how to love is to stop being "bulls in a china shop" as we interact with other people. It is said that one of the staff appointments of President Obama is "all elbows." If you happen to get near him you are bound to get poked. Some people may be more considerate by nature, but all of us must start the love cure for our own hearts by learning to treat others with consideration.

CHOOSE TO HAVE EMPATHY

The second step up the staircase of caring is that, even though we might not know someone, we choose to have empathy for them. That means that we gain an appreciation for the situation, feelings, and motives of other people, some of whom are not like us at all. Empathy can go beyond appreciating others to actually feeling what they do. Jesus Christ displayed this noble trait, as Matthew recorded: "**Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd**" (Matthew 9:35-36). Other translations say that Jesus saw the people as "weary and scattered" (NKJV) or "harassed and helpless" (ESV).

He saw their condition clearly and he felt compassion. His response to their human situation in a fallen world was to teach the good news of redemption in his name and to heal people. No response would have been valid or even useful if he did not understand and appreciate our situation as human beings with broken souls. The first step of love, before we do anything in particular, is to stop and think about what others are experiencing. And this will require a deliberate effort since we are all inherently selfish and see things from our own perspective.

One way to empathize with others is to listen to what they are saying and sometimes not saying. That is a very good start. The study of other people--their thoughts, feelings, and culture--is the task of a lifetime. A second important step in learning to care about others is to stop blocking them out of your heart. The moment you let them in you will have a better appreciation of their situation. Thirdly, and most important, is to study God's word in order to learn God's perspective on people. Who but the Great Shepherd would see people as "**sheep without a shepherd?**" We need to learn to see them through his eyes, and then we will have true empathy.

SHOW UP FOR OTHERS

Thirdly, there may or may not be much we can do for the specific needs which other people have, but showing up for them is an important way to reach out to them. The Apostle James argued that showing up for the needy and vulnerable was essential to being a Christian, as he wrote: "**Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world**" (James 1:27). Notice that he did not say that visiting was only on the job description of pastors. It is, of course. But James said that a willingness to show up in the lives of others is a key authenticating part of faith for every believer.

I remember the passing of a distant great-aunt when I was a teenager. At the time I was very independent and full of myself, and I decided to refuse to go to the funeral. After all, I argued, I had hardly known her and she was dead anyway. How little appreciation of the significance of funerals I had! I now see that getting the family and friends together--just showing up--has a powerful impact on the well-being of others in the family. And, of course, our presence is a prerequisite to actually doing something that would be helpful. You cannot do good to others if you are not around. Part of healing our own hearts is to show up for others.

SPEAK WORDS OF BLESSING

We can take the fourth step up the staircase of love gifts by choosing to speak words of blessing without even getting overly close to people. Words are immensely powerful, and I doubt that we fully understand the impact of what we say or leave unsaid. Scripture begins with the story of the impact of words since God created the universe by speaking words. Paul urged us to think carefully about the impact of our words when he wrote to the Ephesians: **"Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear"** (Ephesians 4:29). "Unwholesome" words are rotten, corrupting words. If one bad apple spoils the bunch one bad sentence can bring rotten things into many people's minds and lives.

By contrast, our challenge is to edify, which means to build people up. It is amazing that mere words can build things, but that is the point of the book of Genesis. We do not possess the power of omnipotent creation as God does, but we have been granted by the image of God in our souls the ability to change other people's realities by what we say. The Bible says that we do this by giving grace through our words. According to the United Bible Societies Greek Dictionary "grace" means "kindness, mercy, or goodwill; a special manifestation of the divine presence, activity, power or glory." That's an amazing set of possibilities for mere words!

This can be done on a train or in a bus station to people we don't even know. Why not? What is the impact of the words commonly thrown around your family or work place? I was in a government office once and saw a sign on a wall which read: "The beatings will continue until morale improves." Apart from being a negative word all by itself, it is evidence that the people who work there are used to a steady flow of words which have a negative impact. Who wants to work in an environment like that?

The flow of words from our mouths are supposed to do the opposite. When we grant mercy, kindness, or goodwill to others, especially for no earthly reason, we reveal Christ dwelling in our hearts. This is not the same as the ineffective technique of trying to avoid negative realities by refusing to speak of them. Those realities will not go away if we deny their presence. But our calling is not to dwell on them but to speak blessing in the face of them without any falsehood. When we take up the opportunity to manifest God's presence by speaking words of grace we can change life on earth for someone, and we find that our hearts are being healed in the process.

TOUCH PEOPLE

Fifthly, this next part of active love may seem controversial to some, but both Jesus and the

Apostles made a point to touch people to express care and concern. In a day when people routinely avoided contact with the sick from fear of infection, Jesus touched them, as Matthew recorded: "**And a leper came to Him and bowed down before Him, and said, 'Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.' Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, 'I am willing; be cleansed.' And immediately his leprosy was cleansed**" (Matthew 8:2-3). Nobody touched the lepers! Jesus knew that, and instead of healing this man with only a word, he chose to heal him also with a touch.

Appropriate loving touch can impact people deeply. Let us not forget that five times the church is commanded in the New Testament to touch when greeting one another, as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "**Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss**" (1 Thessalonians 5:26). The kiss was a specific greeting custom in the ancient Near East which is not normally practiced in the West, but the custom is not as important as the touch. Church time is family time, from God's point of view, and handshakes and hugs are normal in a family.

And how much more significant a touch becomes when someone is in distress. A touch on the arm or a hug can transfer healing from your heart to theirs. A kiss on the forehead can grant grace to the sick. It is true that everyone has a different level of comfort with caring touch, and so it is wise for us to try to get a sense of how others are responding to it. We don't want to minister discomfort! But holy, caring touch is both the example of Jesus Christ and the express command of the apostles. When we minister to others in this way a little of our own soul sickness is healed.

GIVE TO THE NEEDS OF OTHERS

The sixth step of active love reveals that there comes a moment when a kind word and a hug are not all that God requires of us. What if Jesus Christ came to earth, looked at all of us sinners, and his only response was to say nice things to us and give us all hugs? The Apostle John set fire to that foolish idea in his first letter to his children in the faith: "**But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?**" (1 John 3:17). There comes a time for active love to give concrete help to others in their time of need, namely money, things, effort, time, and expertise.

Our willingness to do this reveals whether our hearts are open to others or closed to them. What does your pattern of giving say about the condition of your heart? There is a very personal corollary to this logic of love. Since our hearts experience healing when we express active love to others, a pattern of closing our hearts to others means that we are choosing to hold on to our soul sickness. The human soul can indeed be sick enough to think that this is a smart thing to do.

And how much more smart does having closed hearts seem during times of economic crisis! This would make perfect sense if not for the resources of God. Paul explained this to the Corinthians who were taking a collection for suffering saints in Jerusalem: "**And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; as it is written, 'HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR, HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURES FOREVER.'** Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God" (2 Corinthians 9:8-11).

God's promise is not only that we will have enough for our own needs by relying on God's provision, we will have enough for others. Think of how God planned this all for the work of healing our souls! Since we can give out of his inexhaustible resources, the healing of our hearts need never be cut short.

GIVE YOUR SELFISH INDEPENDENCE AWAY

Seventh and most profoundly, we receive healing in our hearts by giving our selfish independence away. Paul wrote to the Philippians about this: "**Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others**" (Philippians 2:3-4). Learning how to express love at this deep level is the peak of Christian maturity. It is the goal of discipleship.

Why? Because it shows that we are becoming like our Lord and entering the flow of his most powerful will, as Paul continued to explain: "**Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross**" (Philippians 2:5-8).

Selfish independence is what closes our hearts to family members who need us and members of the body of Christ with needs which are not easily met. Selfish independence is what makes people assume that having a free country is their right and that they do not owe anything to anyone for enjoying what was purchased with the sacrifices of others. The irony of giving our selfish independence away is that our greatest healing in heart happens as we give most away--as we act most like Christ.

The Christ-like practice of active love toward others is the mark of a healthy soul and by extension, a healthy church. Beyond being a measure, it is also the means to the end. So let our giving be measured not as much by cost as by the measure of love.

Have you responded to the love gift which Christ has already given you? He has made the greatest sacrifice in looking out for your interests. The path to a healthy soul begins with confessing our sins to God, receiving Jesus Christ as the atonement for our sins, and trusting him to grant us eternal life.

From there, we start learning how to give love gifts to others in imitation of him. We were created to express active love, and every time we do we give a little of our selfishness away.

That's the love cure. Take it!