



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Jesus as Healer
(*Health*, pp. 19-26)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Jesus as Healer

As a folk healer, Jesus restored meaning to people's lives. The Gospel of John challenges disciples to do the works Jesus did "and greater works than these." Contemporary disciples who would like to heal as Jesus heals face strong but not insurmountable challenges. To begin with, we should pursue and develop the vocation given at baptism: to become a holy person.

Prayer

Creator of Life, Creator of our lives,
together, we turn to you.

Hear and heal us, Lord, we pray.

Giver of love, Lover of our lives,
together, we reach out to you.

Hear and heal us, Lord, we pray.

Restore us to wholeness, give us your shalom.

In your salvation is healing for our souls and bodies.

Together, we rest in you for newness of life.

Scripture Reading: Mark 1:21-34

Reflection

The Gospels not only describe Jesus as a healer, they also portray his disciples as healing the sick "by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" (Acts 4:10, referring to the miracle in 3:1-16; cf. Matthew 10:1; Mark 6:13; Luke 9:1-2 and 10:17-20). "The Father who dwells in me does his works," Jesus explains during his final meal with the apostles, and then he promises, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these" (John 14:10b, 12a).

Over the centuries such passages as these have inspired Christians to become medical caregivers and to create many institutions for physical, mental, and spiritual healing. But what would it mean for every disciple to become a healer, to "do greater works than these"? To help answer this question, John Pilch examines what we know about Jesus as a healer.

- ▶ *It is God who heals through us.* "In the Israelite tradition, a healer was a broker of the gift of healing from God," Pilch notes. Jesus healed on behalf of Father (cf. John 9:3) using folk techniques such as "laying on hands or touching the sick person (Mark 1:41), using spittle (Mark 8:23) or mud (John 9:6), pronouncing powerful words – like *talitha cum* (Mark 5:41) or *ephphatha* (Mark 7:34) – and the like."
- ▶ *Healing involves restoring meaning to life whether the person's physical condition improves or remains the same.* Medical anthropologists distinguish "disease" and "illness" as two ways to explain sickness, the underlying physical problem with the body. *Disease* "describes sickness from the perspective of our current scientific, biomedical theories." We speak of "curing" a disease when we restore proper bodily function. *Illness*, by contrast, involves "loss of meaning in life whether because of physical impairment or loss of function," Pilch writes. "For instance, the fever that afflicted Peter's mother-in-law impeded the fulfillment of her domestic role. When the fever left her, she rose and served the visitors



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(Luke 4:38-39). Jesus the healer restored meaning to the life of Peter's mother-in-law. The biblical story shows no interest in the cause of the problem, or whether the problem ever recurred again."

- ▶ *The sicknesses that Jesus encounters are essentially purity problems, which remove a person from God's holy community.* Blindness, deafness, lameness, and skin diseases "rupture a person's relationship with God," for the sufferer "is not permitted to approach God until the problem is remedied. Thus, these problems of sickness recorded in Scripture are best interpreted as illnesses rather than diseases."
- ▶ *Jesus responded to illness as a holy person.* The demon in the synagogue identifies Jesus as "the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24). Is this a clue to understanding him as a healer? Pilch wonders. Anthropologists note that in many cultures holy persons act as God's agents on behalf of others, especially by way of a healing ministry. Holy persons develop through a process of spiritual formation, and Jesus' early ministry parallels this six-part process. First, "the spirit world makes contact" and then the spirit identifies itself (cf. Mark 1:9-11, God's Spirit is present at Jesus' baptism by his cousin, John). Third, the holy person learns the skills for dealing with the spirit world and is guided by a teacher (cf. Mark 1:12-13, during Jesus' testing in the wilderness, "angels waited on him"). The person grows familiar with the spirit (cf. Mark 9:2-10, in the Transfiguration Jesus becomes like Elijah and Moses, and the Spirit speaks again). Finally, the holy person enjoys ongoing spiritual experiences; this is evident as "the Father reveals things to Jesus (e.g., Matthew 11:25-27), Jesus is certain God hears him always (John 11:41-42), and Jesus communicates with God often (John 12:27-30)."

How, then, is every disciple called to participate in Jesus' healing ministry? "What the believer as holy-person-healer can share with the sick and despairing today," Pilch concludes, "is a sharpened understanding of the meaning God intended life to have whatever the actual physical condition of the body."

Study Questions

1. How do medical anthropologists distinguish between curing a disease and healing an illness? Could a sick person be cured but not healed? Or healed but not cured?
2. Do you think Jesus healed illnesses, cured diseases, or both? Why does John Pilch emphasize Jesus' *healing* ministry?
3. How could a contemporary disciple learn to heal as Jesus heals? Is this formation as a healer the same as training to become a medical doctor or nurse? If the two processes are different, are they compatible?
4. What spiritual problems in us, according to Terry York's hymn "Silent Faces," delay or prevent us from healing others' illnesses? How does Jesus enable us to overcome these?

Departing Hymn: "Silent Faces"

Jesus as Healer

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Mark 1:21-34	John 14:1-14
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss Jesus' healings	Discuss the formation of healers today
Questions 1, and 2 or 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To examine the distinction between healing illnesses and curing diseases and to understand Jesus' healing ministry.
2. To explore the process of spiritual formation of a holy-person-healer.
3. To consider how contemporary disciples are called to participate in Jesus' ministry of healing.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Health (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Martha Sterne shares a wonderful insight about the events in the Scripture reading: "Jesus just heals whoever crosses his path—the demoniac one minute and a few hours later the mother-in-law with a fever. She is such a wonderful real touch. He went to Simon Peter's house and she was sick and he healed her and then she could fix a meal. I used to think that was kind of rude of Jesus and the rest of the men to expect her to get out of a sick bed and fix supper. In Mississippi where I was raised, we used to like to recover for a while and get rested up. But now I have known so many East Tennesseans, women and men, who hunger to be able to do the little tasks of their lives—fix supper, mow the lawn, vacuum the house, pay the bills, walk the dog, whatever the little tasks of lives—for those are pleasures that you yearn for when you are too sick or weak or distracted to live your life...."

"All those people Jesus healed in that twenty-four hours in Capernaum before he moved on, well, they are all dead now. Jesus didn't cure them of what kills us all—the mortal truth of being human. But in that twenty-four hours he showed them and us what is more powerful than death—love—and what is more real than any kingdom we can cobble together" ("Mark and the Biggest Parable of All," *Parables*, 78-79).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Mark 1:21-34 from a modern translation.

Reflection

John Pilch refocuses our interpretation of Jesus as healer in several ways. First, he distinguishes *healing illnesses* from *curing diseases* (following medical anthropologists). He reviews the first-century Jewish context of Jesus' ministry, especially the beliefs that only God heals and that sickness typically is a purity problem. Finally, he describes Jesus' spiritual formation as a holy-person-healer. Pilch does not "reduce" Jesus to just a holy person and deny his deity. Rather, he describes the *incarnate* God's works in a way that allows us to take with complete seriousness Jesus' call for us to participate in his ministry. What spiritual formation is required for us to become holy-person-healers who "do greater works than these" as Jesus promises?

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one, discuss the distinction between healing illness and curing disease, and examine Jesus' healing ministry in the first chapter of Mark. In the other session, explore the spiritual formation of a holy-person-healer today.

Study Questions

1. Briefly review how Pilch, following medical anthropologists, uses three key terms: *sickness*, *disease*, and *illness*. First, *sickness* refers to the underlying injury or dysfunction of the physical body. *Disease* and *illness* are "explanatory concepts that assist an analysis and discussion of the reality, sickness. Disease and illness are not the realities."

A *disease* is an analysis of sickness in terms of biomedical theories, and a *cure* consists of correcting the problem described in those theories. So, what counts as a disease (and cure) changes over time when the theories change: e.g., no one has leprosy (in the sense of a contagious skin disease) today, since "leprosy" is no longer used as a medical term; instead someone may have a nerve disorder, Hansen disease, or a skin disfigurement, like psoriasis.

An *illness* interprets the sickness within a socio-cultural context as a "loss of meaning in life," and *healing* "refers to restoring meaning to life whether the person's physical condition improves or remains the same." What counts as healing (restoration to personal relationships, doing meaningful work, etc.) can be different from one culture to another.

2. Most will agree that Jesus *healed illnesses*, but some may want to add that he *cured diseases* (repaired underlying bodily conditions) as well. Pilch is cautious about the latter claim, not because he denies Jesus' power to cure diseases, but because the biblical stories clearly focus on healing. "The results of Jesus' healing activities in each case were that he indeed did restore meaning to people's lives," Pilch writes. "We have no way of knowing, scientifically, the conditions which Jesus treated. We do not have any 'before and after' markers (tests, X-rays, and the like). Nor do we know whether any of the conditions recurred. In other words, biblical writers do not inform the reader about the disease. They rather present the illness, and how the illness was managed by healer and client." Furthermore, Pilch is interpreting the call for disciples to be healers, which is different from being medical curers of disease.
3. "A contemporary disciple who would like to heal as Jesus heals...should pursue and develop the vocation given at baptism: to become a holy person," Pilch writes. "This would involve the six steps to becoming a holy person" that lead to "experiential familiarity with the realm of God." How does your congregation foster spiritual formation of its members? Are traditional Christian practices of prayer, meditation, retreats, solitude, fasting, spiritual reading, discernment groups, Sabbath keeping, and worship encouraged?

Members might approach this question from another direction. Consider the lives of Christian friends who have helped them in times of illness to truly achieve "sharpened understanding of the meaning God intended life to have whatever the actual physical condition of the body." How were these healers formed spiritually?

Spiritual formation as a healer is not the same as medical training, so neither one can substitute for the other. They would seem to be compatible, provided we do not reduce sickness to physical *disease* and ignore the spiritual components of *illness*.

4. Members might mention despair and pride, among other spiritual problems. On the one hand, the overwhelming "masses" of people with illnesses can be daunting, yet Jesus inspires us to encounter them one by one: "We would join you in your loving, in each face, though crowds remain." On the other hand, we tend to protect ourselves by not identifying with others' suffering; Jesus leads us to "see ourselves in each one's eyes" and understand "Health is wholeness with our brothers, with our sisters, in their pain."

Departing Hymn

"Silent Faces" is on pp. 47-49 of *Health*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.