

Working in the Jerusalem area, I often felt the general attitude of the Jewish people that there should be prioritized blessings – an emphasis on the “healing of the fittest”¹. An example of this is reflected in the incident of the invalid by the pool of Bethesda². This story illustrates the basic idea that only those who were basically healthy would really be able to benefit from the expected miracle of the stirring of the water.

It was wonderful the way that Jesus sought this person out and served him, as He had such compassion on him. The man was evidently the sickest one there, and he had been an invalid for almost four decades. Jesus was drawn to this man because he was so helpless and eventually formed a relationship with him, even after He had healed him³.

It is easy for me to imagine how the cripple must have felt, as he watched every day when someone in much better health got into the water and apparently received the blessing of healing! God understands that so many have that kind of pain and seeks to heal us all, though generally in a spiritual way until the resurrection occurs⁴.

Healing only the “fittest” is not God’s way at all. The perspective of being “fit” or spiritually healthy is completely contrary to our actual status before Him. I remember that Jesus said⁵:

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

He cannot really help those who are self-righteous, like many of the Pharisees that He encountered, unless they in humility recognize their weakness. Those who feel that they are the fittest, and are constantly scrambling for the best seats and other means of personal recognition⁶, must realize that they are not better than others⁷. They must expect disappointment if they expect God to exalt them for their worth.

Christ came not to be served, but to serve⁸, and we should follow Him in that purpose. He stoops down to make us great⁹, meaning that He lifts us up from the miry depths¹⁰. Christ is the master teacher who does not just concentrate on the good students, but on those who are struggling¹¹ the most.

Jesus often spoke about the leadership of shepherds and how it applied to Himself as the Great Shepherd¹². His approach to the weak reminds me of the writings of the prophet Ezekiel¹³, where the bad shepherds pushed around the sheep and the strong trampled the weak. He taught us the true meaning of how the weak should be supported and not taken advantage of, and often made the point that this was not how Jewish leadership were treating the common people. His parable of the Good Samaritan¹⁴ was a powerful lesson in this regard.

I have seen struggles between followers of the Way that cause one to be favored over another, as though the “fittest” one is worthy of fellowship but the other is not. I have also seen some who aspire to be leaders who do not pursue those who reside in the margin or background, as though not worthy of their attention¹⁵. Our fellowship should not be this way, as we should bear each other’s burdens¹⁶ and help those who are weak¹⁷. And we must remember that we are all sinners¹⁸ in the sight of God, but we do not fall short of God’s grace.

The fact that we are “unworthy” (or worthy on our own merit) does not mean that we are “worthless”. King David felt worthy of God’s mercy even though he confessed to be a miserable sinner¹⁹, and God responded to him. And He will respond to us if we have a contrite heart²⁰.

1. I use this phrase in comparison to the similar phrase “survival of the fittest”.
2. John 5:2-9.
3. John 9:35-41.
4. “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” Revelation 22:1-2.
5. Matthew 9:12-13.

7. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves..." Philippians 2:3.
5. Matthew 23:6.
8. Matthew 20:28.
9. See Psalm 18:35 in the New Century Version, Evangelical Heritage Version, and a previous NIV edition; this generally translated differently, but I love this interpretation of this verse – Christ came (stooped) down to save us, and thus to lift us up.
10. Psalm 69:2.
11. See my story "Teaching Past the Best Students" in Stories of The Second Swordsman.
12. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." John 10:11; "Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep", Hebrews 13:20.
13. See Ezekiel 34.
14. Luke 10:25-37.
15. I am puzzled by what I see sometimes as a "selective outreach" program that only pursues certain people.
16. Galatians 6:2.
17. "And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone." 1 Thessalonians 5:14. Also, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves." Romans 15:1 (note the preceding material in Romans 14).
18. Romans 3:23.
19. See David's humility in Psalm 51; a similar humility is seen by Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15-16 when he describes himself as the worst of sinners.
18. Psalm 51:17.

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