

Charity and Healthcare

"Proof? Positive!" Series, June 1 & 2, 2024 | John 5:1-17

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Christianity has made the world a better place.

I know that some people disagree with me, even in the area of charity and healthcare.

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, called Christianity a form of mental illness.

He labeled it a "sweet—or bittersweet—poison", a "neurosis," an "intoxicant," and "childishness to be overcome."¹

Freud thought Christianity was a *disease*, not a cure.

Sociologist Rodney Stark studied the impact of Christianity on the modern world AND on the ancient world as well. He concluded that Christianity was a cure for a very sick ancient world.

He wrote: "To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services." – Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*²

Even the ancient enemies of Christianity saw their charity and the way they cared for the sick.

Roman emperor Julian was a pagan who ruled after a period of rule by Christians.

He's called "Julian the Apostate" because he sought to re-establish paganism in the empire.

But he lamented pagans' unwillingness to care for their own. He wrote, "It is shameful that ours should be so destitute of our assistance."

Julian could not help but see value in what the Christians did for the sick. He wrote: "The impious Galileans relieve both their own poor and ours." – Julian the Apostate³

That fact has never changed.

Christians were generous in charity and healthcare in the ancient world.

We brought groundbreaking care to the medieval world.

And in the modern world we have covered the globe with charities and medicine.

Why is this so? Why are Christians so interested in charity and healthcare?

Showing God's love is a mandate in the Bible.

¹ Rodney Stark, *America's Blessings*, p. 94.

² Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 161.

³ Schmidt, p. 129.

It's something Jesus modelled and told us, his followers, to be prepared to do as well. And as we see in our Scripture reading today, it rises from God's nature.

Jesus revealed God's compassionate nature.

Jesus went to the place where sick people could be found. (John 5:1-4)

Jesus went to the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. He was there for a pilgrimage feast. The Pool was located near one of the entrances to the Temple.

The Pool of Bethesda was also the closest thing to a hospital that existed in the ancient world.

They were called Asklepions, temples to Asclepios, the god of healing.

They were built around natural springs, where worshippers would wait for Asclepios or his snake servants to stir the waters, a sign that patients might be healed.

These were pagan places.⁴

In Jerusalem, Jesus went to this pool. There were many who wanted healing.

Jesus healed a man who had been lame for thirty-eight years. (John 5:5-9)

Jesus asked the man if he wanted to be healed.

The man replied with excuses. There was no one to put him in the water when it was stirred.

Jesus cut through all of that. He told the man to get up, pick up his bed, and walk.

The man was healed instantly. He got up, picked up his bed, and started walking.

Jesus ran into difficulty because he healed on the Sabbath. (John 5:10-16)

In the Old Testament, God declared the Sabbath or seventh day to be holy.

People were not to work on the Sabbath day. It was against tradition to heal on the Sabbath; that was work. And it was against the Law to carry a bed around on the Sabbath.

The man's healing caught the attention of the Jewish religious leaders, which led to questions.

Who had healed him? Who had violated Sabbath? And who ordered this man to do so, too?

The man hadn't caught Jesus' name. Then he ran into Jesus in the temple. He must have learned who Jesus was, because he ran to tell the Jewish religious leaders. Certainly, he thought, Jesus should get credit for such a miracle! But the religious leaders hardened their hearts against Jesus. They concluded that he had broken the Sabbath. This was a breaking point for them.

However, Jesus showed us something profound. (John 5:17)

In **John 5:17** we read Jesus' response:

But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working."

When he said, "My Father is working until now," he meant that his Father was working all the time, even on the Sabbath. The rabbis understood. They knew that God was unique. When God rested on the seventh day in creation, he didn't stop all work. He couldn't. God stopped creating, but he still had to maintain creation. If God stopped working completely, creation would stop working. Or existing. So,

⁴ <https://www.drivethruhistory.com/pool-of-bethesda/> on 2019-08-13

the rabbis knew that God still worked on the Sabbath. THAT's what Jesus was saying. God the Father works on the Sabbath because it's his NATURE.

None of this was news. What Jesus said next, though, was news.

"And I am working." Jesus declared himself equal with God the Father. "Just as God the Father is always working, even on the Sabbath, so I am always working. Just like God my Father."

The religious leaders picked up on what Jesus was saying and were furious. (See verse 18!)

Jesus had declared himself equal with God!

And he was saying that just as God the Father must work on the Sabbath because there are things in his nature that he cannot help but do, so Jesus—God the Son—must work on the Sabbath and do what is his nature, the stuff that he cannot help but do.

Healing is his nature. He cannot help but heal on the Sabbath. It's WHAT he does. It's WHO he is. It's his nature. It's God nature!

Jesus revealed God's compassionate nature.

There is a critically important passage in the Old Testament. In it, God tells us his name, and in telling us his name, he reveals so much about his character.

In **Exodus 34:6 (NET)** the LORD proclaimed his name,

... "The LORD, the LORD, the **compassionate** and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in loyal love and faithfulness ..."

The word in Hebrew is *rakhum*. It's closely related to the word for "womb."

Rakhum is an intense feeling like seeing someone suffering and being moved.

Rakhum leads to action, like providing a beloved child with everything they need to thrive.

In the prophet Isaiah, the people of Israel had rejected God, they had turned to idols and evil, and they had faced the consequences of their actions. Then in **Isaiah 49:15** we read:

"Can a woman forget her nursing child,
that she should have no **compassion** on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you."

A mother may forget to have compassion on her child, but God will never forget or stop having compassion for his people.

God is compassionate. He sees the sin and suffering of his people. And he comes to us in Jesus to be with us and to pay the price for our sin, that we might be forgiven and free.

Compassion is God's nature. It's his character.

That's the compassion Jesus shows repeatedly and here in John 5.

That's the compassion Jesus tells his people to show.

The world does not show compassion naturally.

For instance, the famous Greek philosopher Plato argued that medicine should be used only to keep a person alive who could contribute to the wellbeing of the state.

He thought that it was appropriate for a doctor to treat a basically healthy man who had a useful occupation and who could return to his work. If a doctor prescribed for an ordinary laborer a cure that took time, this is how Plato thought the worker should respond:

He replies at once that he has no time to be ill, and that he sees no good in a life which is spent in nursing his disease to the neglect of his customary employment; and therefore bidding good-bye to this sort of physician, he resumes his ordinary habits, and either gets well and lives and does his business, or, if his constitution fails, he dies and has no more trouble. – Plato, *The Republic*, 3.406d-e

A good doctor would not want to “lengthen out good-for-nothing lives... such a cure would have been of no use either to himself, or to the State.” – Plato, *The Republic*, 3.407d-e

That was the ancient mindset.⁵

Consequently, history teaches us that the Romans (like many, many others) abandoned their sick.

In the middle of the third century, there was a plague in Alexandria in Egypt.

One author described Roman behavior: “[They] thrust aside anyone who began to be sick, and kept aloof even from their dearest friends, and cast the sufferers out upon the public roads half dead, and left them unburied, and treated them with utter contempt when they died.”⁶

Inuit customs remind us that the ancients were not alone.

The Inuit or Eskimos of North America live in places where the environment is harsh.

When food becomes very scarce, they would look around and see that there were elderly people among them who were not able to contribute to the community’s survival.

Sometimes the elderly would commit suicide to relieve the burden on the group.

Other times, they would be strangled, stabbed, or abandoned in the cold.

The practice of killing the elderly and the weak has predominated across many, many cultures throughout the centuries.

The Gospel has made the world a more compassionate place.

Christians made the Roman world a more compassionate place.

Christians stayed in places like Alexandria when the plagues came and the Romans fled.

Christians cared for their sick. They even cared for the sick the pagans had left behind.

The care was basic. They kept them drinking water, they put wet cloths on their foreheads, they cleaned and fed them. This care led to more Christians surviving plagues than did pagans.

And when Christians nursed sick pagans back to life, the pagans frequently became Christians.

That is part of how Christianity grew from a few thousand people in 40 AD to becoming the majority of the Roman empire by 350 AD.⁷

⁵ Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, p. 129.

⁶ Schmidt, p. 152.

⁷ Sharon James, “Biblical Christianity’s Impact on Healthcare and Philanthropy,” in *The Bulletin* from Affinity Gospel Churches in Action, Issue 46 (February, 2021), p. 2.

Christians made the medieval world a more compassionate place.

As antiquity ended and the Middle Ages began, Christians were establishing institutions in every region where Christianity spread.

In the ancient world and in the Middle Ages, life expectancy was very low, around 30 years. Consequently, many children ended up as orphans. In the early days of Christianity, Christians would take orphans into their homes and raise them. As the Church grew and the number of orphans grew, Christians began to build orphanages to raise, educate, and provide for these children.⁸

In the early Middle Ages, homes also arose for the care of the elderly.⁹

They built lodging places near each cathedral that provided places for travelers to get hospitality and for the sick to get care.¹⁰

Christians pioneered nursing.

Florence Nightingale wasn't the first nurse or the first Christian nurse, but she is known as the founder of modern nursing.

She is famous for the care she gave to British soldiers during the Crimean War against Russia.

Word had reached Britain that injured soldiers were being neglected, sitting in terribly unsanitary conditions, and dying not from their wounds but from disease.

Nightingale was sent with a small corps of nurses to tend to the soldiers.

She arrived and found soldiers lying in their own waste. Rodents and bugs were everywhere.

Nightingale and her crew cleaned the hospital, provided basic needs to patients, including healthy meals.

Nightingale was famous for making rounds carrying a lamp at night among the soldiers and became known as "the Lady of the Lamp" or "the Angel of Crimea."

After the war, she revolutionized and institutionalized nursing and the training of nurses.¹¹

These are the things Florence Nightingale is known for. What is less known is that Florence Nightingale was motivated by a call from God to a life of service.¹²

Christian missionaries made more places more compassionate.

The story is told among many scholars that Christian missionaries were culturally insensitive agents of Western colonialism. That's the assumption.

But it turns out that the reality is much different.

Missionaries typically opened the first hospitals and clinics in wherever they served.

They brought hygiene and medical training.

They brought new crops and livestock, and improved the quality of people's diets.

⁸ Schmidt, pp. 131-134.

⁹ Schmidt, pp. 134-136.

¹⁰ Schmidt, p. 155.

¹¹ <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/florence-nightingale-1>

¹² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/channel/utilities/print.html?type=article&id=3682>

They brought longer life expectancy and lower infant mortality. They taught people to read. Their compassion went deep, and they did it all in some of the toughest places on earth.¹³

Studies have conclusively proven their impact: "Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant presence in the past are on average more economically developed today, with comparatively better health, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, greater literacy, higher educational attainment (especially for women), and more robust membership in nongovernmental associations." – Robert Woodberry¹⁴

Christians have fundamentally reshaped the way Westerners perceive things!

Today people see natural disasters and feel a pull to respond.

People see famines and sickness and death and want to do something. They feel compassion.

They are not showing that human nature has changed. Nor are they showing that we have somehow developed compassion on our own.

Instead, as one author wrote, "Christian ideals have permeated society until non-Christians, who claim to live a 'decent life' without religion, have forgotten the origin of the very content and context of their 'decency.'"¹⁵

The Gospel has made the world a more compassionate place.

Disciples of Jesus show compassion.

Let's remind ourselves again of the definition of a disciple.

A disciple is someone who has decided to follow Jesus, is being changed by Jesus, and is multiplying disciples of Jesus.

Being a disciple of Jesus changes our heads, hearts, and hands. How does being a disciple of Jesus change how we think and feel about compassion, as well as how we act?

Decide to Follow: Know that God is compassionate.

When we are in difficult circumstances, it is easy to question God's compassion.

Does he really see me? Does he really care? Does he ever DO anything?

Disciples of Jesus KNOW that God is compassionate. As we see today, it's his nature.

We see God's compassionate nature throughout the Bible.

We see God's compassionate nature most clearly in Jesus.

We see God's compassionate nature coming out in his people in history.

We see God's compassionate nature all around us, day by day.

God sees us and cares. He is with us. He gives us life, forgiveness, new life, his Spirit, and eternal life. He gives us exactly what we need. He loves us.

Disciples of Jesus KNOW that God is compassionate.

¹³ James, p. 5.

¹⁴ Andrea Palpant Dilley, "The Surprising Discovery about Those Colonialist, Proselytizing Missionaries" in *Christianity Today*, January 8, 2014, P. 7.

¹⁵ Schmidt, p. 131.

Be Changed: Accept God's compassion in Jesus!

Ultimately, the Gospel is not about what we do. It's not even about the best of what we do.

The Gospel is all about the glory of God, the love and compassion of God.

The Gospel is all about what God has done for us in Jesus.

Before we can ever really feel compassion or treat others with compassion, we need to receive God's compassion for ourselves. Otherwise, we're just trying to be good, do good, and prove how good we really are. That has never worked, and it will never work.

The compassion that we feel for others and show to others is a grateful response to the compassion God has shown us in Jesus. It's an outflow of God's compassion toward us.

The heart-change we as disciples need is that we accept God's compassion for us in Jesus!

Multiply: Show compassion.

Once we have accepted God's compassion for us in Jesus, we can't help but give it to others.

We see their need and are moved to do something. That's compassion!

It's what drives us toward what we have called the BLESS lifestyle. We begin with prayers for those who do not know Jesus; we listen with care; we eat together and extend hospitality, as we have for millennia; and we serve with love. With compassion. And we share the story of how God has changed our lives. Compassion is the heart of this lifestyle we all live!

Compassion opens doors for the Gospel.

Serving, showing compassion, has opened doors for the Gospel in the past.

Serving, showing compassion, is opening doors for the Gospel around the world right now.

That's what MedSend, one of our World Outreach Partners, has found.

MedSend helps Christian healthcare professionals get to the least-served parts of the world.

Healthcare opens doors for them that wouldn't open for anyone else. Doors have closed all around the world to missionaries, but healthcare workers are welcome almost everywhere.

And the workers they are sending walk through those open doors to serve, to show compassion, and to share the Good News about Jesus.

Serving, showing compassion opens doors for the Gospel around the world.

Serving, showing compassion, opens doors for the Gospel in the places where we live, work, and play right now.

Let's show compassion.

Let's show compassion as generations of our ancestors in the faith have done.

Let's show compassion and keep changing the world.

Let's show compassion and show God's image and nature to the world.

Let's show compassion and open doors for the Gospel.