

The Heart of the Healer

I have been teaching on the subject of the Kingdom of God, which I have repeatedly told you is the basic theme of the Bible. As we try to find the unifying thread that holds together this big book called the Bible, the unifying thread is the theme of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is nothing less than God's reign, God's rule, God extending his rule and taking back ground, turf, person by person and deliverance by deliverance and healing by healing that has been lost to God's great enemy, the counterfeit king who set up a wicked kingdom, named Satan. The story of the Bible is God aggressively taking back ground and taking back people that were lost when our first parents rebelled against God and fell into sin.

Now, today I want to tackle a subject that really is a major divider in the Christian church and that is the subject of healing. Many churches and many Christians have come to a place that they don't believe that God directly heals. While most Christians say that "we are open to the possibility that God can do anything he wants," the bottom line is that our expectation is that he doesn't want to heal miraculously apart from the use of drugs and medicine, hospitals and physicians and therapists and all of that. We theoretically believe that God could do

anything he wants, but practically much of the church has adopted the posture that God probably does not want to heal apart from the medical means available to us.

Let me just share a word about terminology here. We will look at this issue of God's desire to heal. But here at the Vineyard we prefer to use the term divine healing over against lots of other terms that could be used. Sometimes healing is called "miracle healing." The weakness in the phrase "miracle healing" is that miracles can be done by Satan or by someone other than God. We see miracles in the Bible done by Satan and demons in Acts 8 and in the book of Revelation.

Occasionally, people will speak about faith healing. But faith healing is weak because it implies that the source of healing is a person's faith as opposed to Jesus. Our faith doesn't produce anything. It is who we place our faith in that provides for us a healing.

A number of people object to the phrase divine healing because they say, "Rich, all healing is divine, whether your body recuperates of its own properties and powers or if you receive medicine. All of that is a gift from God. We don't have anything that we haven't received from our creator." I agree with all of that, but in trying to search for a phrase or term that describes God's direct intervention apart from medicine and apart from some of the body's normal recuperative functions, the best phrase we have been able to come up with in the Vineyard is "divine healing."

Right off the bat, I want to tackle the question: does divine healing really happen? Is this just a big, elaborate, conspiratorial fraud where a bunch of people keep trading fake stories around like stories of the Bermuda Triangle or Big Foot? Every time you go to search the thing out, you really never do discover the Loch

Ness Monster. It always has disappeared. It is always right around the corner. Does divine healing really happen? Living in a scientific age there are many people, particularly those trained in medicine or those who have a scientific bent or have a background in the sciences, for whom the whole subject of divine healing is really rather difficult to believe. A lot of people are saying, if people are really being healed, there ought to be some scientific evidence, some medical evidence, that prayer to God really does make a difference. Do you have any evidence, Rich?

For those of you who are of a scientific bent, or you are just interested in the subject of evidence for healing, you may want to pick up a recent book by Dr. Dale Matthews called "The Faith Factor: Proof of the Healing Power of Prayer." The book is available at most Christian bookstores. We can order some copies here in our bookstore. Let me share with you how Dr. Matthews' book opens:

"Imagine for a moment that you are visiting your trusted physician for a routine physical examination. You don't have any serious problems, just some aches and pains, nothing to worry about. Your doctor gives you a clean bill of health and maybe some advice on medication for some of the minor problems you are reporting. And then he or she says to you, 'I want you to know that there is something else you can do that will really improve your chances of staying healthy. It is readily available and accessible. It is free, would you like to know more about it?'"

Or let's say you are facing a serious medical problem. You are having chest pains and your doctor, after reviewing the results of an angiogram, recommends by-pass surgery and describes the procedure. And you are asking questions about the

surgery and are asking questions about the prognosis. And the doctor says that there is one factor that will lead to a much higher rate of recovery. Are you interested in finding out about it?

Can you imagine anyone saying, “No, I really want to have a poor rate of recovery. I don’t want to be healthy.”

Based on the medical and scientific evidence that is now available, it can be proven that faith in God increases

[Slide #1]

Our capacity to:

- **Stay healthy and avoid life threatening and disabling diseases like cancer and heart disease.**
- **Recover faster and with fewer complications if you do develop a serious illness.**
- **Live longer.**
- **Encounter life-threatening and terminal illnesses with greater peacefulness and less pain.**
- **Avoid mental illnesses like depression and anxiety and cope more effectively with stress.**
- **Steer clear of problems with alcohol, drugs, and tobacco.**
- **Enjoy a happier marriage and family life.**
- **Find a greater sense of meaning and purpose in your life.**

And what Dr. Matthews does in his book is he simply pulls together the last three decades of studies in authoritative medical journals like The American Journal of Public Health, The American Journal of Psychiatry, The American Journal of Medicine, Heart and Lung. There is such a breadth of evidence regarding the positive health-giving benefits of faith in God. That, indeed, a person has to reject scientific evidence these days to disbelieve in divine healing.

There was a classic 1972 study of 91,909 individuals living in Washington County, Maryland. It found that those who attended church once or more a week had significant lower death rates from the following:

- From coronary artery disease there was a 50% reduction.
- From emphysema there was a 56% reduction.
- From Cirrhosis of the liver there was a 74% reduction.
- From Suicide, a 53% reduction.

In a 1991 study, of 1,077 students at Northeastern Illinois University, the highly religious students, 1/5 of the students had overall better health, less sickness, fewer doctor visits, and fewer injuries than their less religious or non-religious classmates.

Certainly, a person might argue: Well, Rich, those studies don't prove anything except that religious people might have more positive health habits. We agree that if you don't smoke and you don't drink alcohol excessively and if you take care of your body, and have a way to deal with problems through prayer or meditation to some higher power, then that is probably going to have a health-giving effect.

Well, those studies didn't control for healthy habits. But there was another study in Tecumseh, Michigan of 2,754 men and women and it found that women

who attended church frequently lived longer than those who attended less frequently. And this study did control for other factors like smoking, history of heart disease, and bronchitis. In other words, the study evened out the other factors except for church attendance and it found that women who attend church more often live longer than those who don't.

Now, here is an interesting study. It may be the most famous and provocative study on the effects of prayer on healing. It was conducted by Randolph Byrd and published in 1988. Dr. Byrd conducted his study in the coronary care unit of San Francisco General Hospital, in which 393 coronary patients were randomly assigned to two different groups. One group of 192 patients were prayed for by outside intercessors. They chose born-again Christians around the country to regularly pray for the patients until they were discharged.

The second group of 201 patients, the control group, didn't receive the experimental prayer, just to provide a basis for comparison. Now all the patients in the study knew that they were participating in a study of prayer, but no patient knew to which group he had been assigned, and none of the doctors or nurses knew which patient had been assigned. It was a scientifically controlled, double blind study so that it controlled for the so-called placebo effect. This was the standard way that they would study or test new medicines or new procedures. The first group received standard medical care.

Then what Dr. Byrd did was he measured for all these different clinical variables, like the number of patients who developed congestive heart failure cardiopulmonary arrest pneumonia, need for the use of diuretics and antibiotic

medication the need for incubation, and different kinds of medical procedures. The bottom line finding was that there was a statistically significant difference between the patients in the control group and the patients who were prayed for. The patients in the control group were, across the board, more than 2x likely to suffer complications than those who had been prayed for. The patients in the control group had 2.5x more episodes of congestive heart failure. Nearly 5x more episodes of cardiopulmonary arrest. 4x more episodes of pneumonia. 5x more need for antibiotics, etc.

Patients were never touched. It wasn't the healing power of touch. They didn't know they were being prayed for. It was just people hundreds of thousands of miles away seeking God on behalf of a sick patient's recovery. And apparently, God answered.

I haven't the time today, or the inclination really, to go through all the studies. He literally cites hundreds of studies in his book called *The Faith Factor*. But there is a wealth of scientific evidence that prayer to God for his intervention really does make a difference in terms of healing. And I am always encouraged when I come upon things like this because there is such a great myth of this so-called conflict between faith and reason; or a conflict between faith and science. What continually occurs, and this is true in the area of psychiatry and the area of child raising and finance and addiction prevention, we leave the Bible behind as a culture and we try to come up with answers for how it is that we are going to live healthy, wealthy lives. And then after banging our head into the wall, lots of attempts to build a healthy life, the society ends up coming back to answers that were provided for us in

the Bible thousands of years ago. We keep coming back to the same child raising lessons, the same marriage lessons, the same sexual faithfulness and fidelity lessons, and the same help lessons.

Today, what I want to do is take a look, as we begin this look at healing [and we are going to look at it over the next few weeks] I want to look at the Heart of the Healer. And we will find out the essential prerequisite for healing is the heart of the one who is doing the healing. I have called today's talk "The Heart of the Healer." Mark 1:29-45. Let's pray.

Now we read in Mark the following:

[Slide #2] Mark 1:29-31

"As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them."

Now, let me offer to you the setting for this. Jesus is going home with Simon Peter, that is Peter the apostle, and Andrew, his brother, to Peter's house. They are coming home after an awesome synagogue service. It is like I am going home after this really incredible church service with a couple of friends. Generally, people ate around noon a big Sabbath meal. So it is noontime, or 12:30 p.m. on Saturday. Instead of a delicious meal, they come home to a sick cook. What a drag. You are looking forward to a really big dinner after church and you have some friends with you. You are enjoying stories about the morning. It had been great. This guy began manifesting a demon and Jesus ordered it out. They are telling these great God

stories. Peter comes in, “Hey, mom. I am home. I have Jesus with me and some friends. Whatcha cookin?”

And his mother-in-law is laid up sick. Just as a side note, it is apparent from the Bible that Peter was married. He had a mother-in-law and all of the elaborate theories around the so-called celibacy of the priesthood and Peter being the first Pope and supposedly celibate and unmarried are simply false. Peter’s wife apparently accompanied Peter on his apostolic journeys. The apostle Paul reports that in 1 Cor. 9:5.

But getting back to the story, they walk in on a sick mother-in-law. And if you look at the other gospels, Jesus walked into the room and stood by the bed. He was following rabbinic rules for visiting the sick. According to the rabbis, you didn’t sit on the bed where the sick person was. You didn’t even sit in a chair. You were to stand when you were visiting the sick or sit on the floor. Jesus followed rabbinic practice and stood by the bed.

We don’t know what condition this woman had. Mark said she had a fever. The word for fever is literally fire. We don’t know, the Bible doesn’t tell us the cause of the fever. But she apparently had all the symptoms – the flushed cheeks, the burning hot skin. Maybe she was shivering in bed or sweating. Perhaps she had a sore throat, various aches. She was laid out. You know what it is like when you have a fever. Her clothing was wet with perspiration. She probably looked a mess.

What strikes me about the story is the utter unpretentiousness, the simplicity with which Jesus did the healing. One of the values we have here in the Vineyard is simplicity. In all that we do whether in our dress, our architecture, our music, the

way we conduct ministry, we believe in the biblical value of simplicity. And I think we see it here, this value of simplicity in v. 31 where it says, “So he went to her, took her hand, and had her stand up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them”

What a simple account. And what is notable is what is not present in the account, for example, there is no ritual that Jesus employs in healing her. He doesn’t take out the vial of water that was drawn from the Jordan River at the spot at which he was baptized. He doesn’t take out a prayer cloth and lay it dramatically across her forehead as a point of contact for her seed faith. He doesn’t take out a vial of oil produced from an olive tree that grows on the side of the Mt. of Olives. What we see in Jesus’ healing is the almost entire lack of ritual, far from the elaborate ritualistic services that the church developed later on for healing—elaborate prayers and elaborate requirements of confession and communion and holy objects. Jesus just reaches out his hand and touches her and heals her. Complete simplicity. You don’t need long elaborate prayers. Sometimes folks who pray for healing feel the need to quote 50 Bible passages. Healing prayer is short and sweet; it may sound like “Be healed!” There’s quietness as we wait on God and listen for his lead.

There is also an absence of hype around this. When I think of simplicity I think of the total absence of hype. Jesus doesn’t walk into the room preceded by three hours of testimonies that would raise the faith of the crowd whipped up to a frenzy. He doesn’t have people advertising “miracle service at Simon Peter’s home – Extravaganza 27 A.D.: A Life-Changing Conference.” It was never this “extravaganza” kind of hype around the ministry of Jesus. Most of it was private.

Jesus never put out brochures with him having lightening bolts coming from his fingers or the skyline of Capernium being descended upon by this great comet flashing from the sky.

The fact is, most of Jesus' miracles did not take place in the context of a church service, a synagogue service. Not only were they not in the context of a miracle service, they weren't in the context of a religious service.

John Wimber, who was a dear friend of mine who was president and head of the AVC, before his death last year used to say "The meat is in the streets." The meat is in the streets. In other words, it is in the market place, it is at work. It is in your family, in your neighborhood, at your school, in your dormitory, in your apartment complex that God desires to use you to heal the sick. The main place for healings is not meant to be up front in the church service on Sunday mornings. That can happen and sometimes does happen, but the meat is in the streets.

And I think in addition here, we see not only the absence of ritual and the absence of hype, but we see the absence of technique. We in America right now have such a passion for technique. We are a nation of managers and engineers. We think that everything can be broken down into a series of steps so that we will be able to bring healing under our control. And what I think is wonderful about the healings of Jesus is that there is utter absence of technique. Sometimes Jesus touches people. Sometimes people were healed without a touch at a distance. Sometimes they were healed with just a word. Sometimes they were healed with a prayer or declaration: "Be healed" a command. In Mark 2 Jesus says to the paralytic: "Get up." Sometimes people touched Jesus. In Mark 5 the woman touches the hem

of his robe. Sometimes Jesus uses spit and mud. We are so focused on technique that you actually could envision churches becoming like the spitters and other churches becoming the muddites – and then arguing over the types of mud to use. No, no, no – Jesus didn't use beach sand. He used clay. People splitting off from each other. Bags of certain kinds of sand being sold in Christian bookstores.

See, divine healing is not a technique. I am going to have to say that over and over and I have to remind myself of that living in a technique culture. Divine healing is not about technique. Divine healing is all about the life of God. It is all about the love of God. Life with God is never a technique. It is an abandoned wildly free love. Think with me for a minute. Divine healing is about the love of God.

Can you reduce love to just some formula or technique? I know we tried to in America. There are all these books out – 42 Ways to Say I Love You. But real love is free of all of that. And what we are trying to do when we pray for the sick is we are just trying to be vehicles, vessels of the love of God and the life of God. So we are opening ourselves up to dependence on God in this instance. Make me a channel of your love. Make me a channel of your life. This is totally subject, God, to your control, not mine. No technique.

And there was no “claiming.” One moment, the woman was feverish, chills, sweats, achy, the next moment she wasn't. She wasn't just standing on the promise of healing from Jesus. The woman was healed. The proof of the healing was that she got up and began to wait on them.

Divine healing is reality based and simple. It is free of our control. There is no hype around it. And when we get into the issue of healing, we just want to tell the

truth – it is a value that the Bible has and it is a value of this church. Here in the Vineyard we never say we're healed from prayer unless we are healed. Our approach here is that if you are not healed as a result of prayer, you say, "I am not healed." You don't play these word games and say, "Well, I am still claiming healing." You don't lose healing that has been given to you. Peter's mother-in-law, when she took her eyes off Jesus, didn't get the fever again and go back to bed. Divine healing takes.

The approach we take here in the Vineyard is if a person is not healed, we say: "Okay, we will keep praying for you." You don't need to keep claiming, we just keep praying. No ritual; no hype; no technique; no claiming; no money. Divine healing, like all the wonderful gifts from God, is free. You don't have to put a certain amount in the offering plate to get it. You don't have to send away for a prayer cloth or give a certain amount of money to a minister in order to prove to God that you really believe you are healed.

The text goes on to say:

[Slide #3]

Mark 1:32-32

"That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was."

Now this is after the Sabbath, after the sun had set, so we are talking about Saturday night. It has been a long day. Jesus taught in the morning. He healed

Peter's mother-in-law at noon. And the tense of the verbs here demonstrate that what is going on is not just that people were brought to Jesus, but that people kept being brought to Jesus – case after case after case kept arriving. There was this continual surging mass of people coming to Jesus saying,

“Jesus, here is my son.”

“Jesus, over here. My friend is blind.”

“Wait a minute. I was here first.”

“Jesus, my wife has asthma, she is having a hard time breathing.”

“Jesus, lay your hand...”

“Wait a minute, there is something wrong with my daughter over here.”

“Over here, over here...”

“No, we're next...”

“Watch it...”

I don't know if you have ever been in the position of being grabbed or pulled to pray after a long meeting and you are tired. Not that I am any great person or great healer, but this has happened to me on a number of occasions, especially when I do conferences in other locations – especially conferences overseas. I think the fact that I am the person up front creates the idea, “Well, certainly, he can pray for me and God will listen to him. Because he is on the stage, he must have a pipeline to God as opposed to my friend or my pastor or my wife or me.” There have been times literally where I have been caught and had to pray until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. There were lines of people. I remember on one occasion this guy grabbing my hand, I was praying for someone, and he grabbed my hand and put it on his head and said,

“No, me. You pray for me.” It was so offensive. It was so self-centered. And yet, I remember feeling at the time how desperate he was. How needy that he would do that and so I prayed for him.

But I will tell you, if you pray for 20 people in a row, and there is just another line of folks, you find yourself so depleted. There were times when I felt like I was just asleep on my feet. And I just wanted to get out of there. Please, let me just go home and go to bed.

The amazing thing about our divine healer Jesus is that he is so available. The crowd is surging. People are yelling. “Come over here.” “Heal me.” According to the gospels, that was what people do. “Heal my daughter.” When people are sick they become really self-focused. We feel bad. And the awesome thing about this story of Jesus, our Divine Healer, is how available Jesus makes himself. This is the one we turn to when we turn to Christ. Jesus is the available God. We no longer have the Old Testament outer court and inner court where you are kept away from the presence of God. Jesus is God come to us. God made available to us. The healing of God coming to us. Jesus is not simply the God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac. Even less, Jesus is not the God of the philosophers, the God way out there. He is God come down.

I love the devotional writer Richard Foster’s, line about how people complain. They say, “Well, I have prayed, but I feel like my prayers bounce off the ceiling. My prayers never get past the ceiling.”

Richard Foster said, “They don’t have to get past the ceiling, because Jesus is here. You don’t have to get beyond the ceiling.”

That is why the apostle Paul writes in Rom. 10:6, "But the righteousness that is by faith says, 'Do not say in your heart who will ascend into heaven (that is to bring Christ) or who will descend into the deep (that is to bring Christ up). The word is near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart.'" In Jesus healing has come down. It is available and near. We have to reach out for it in faith and lay hold of it. We need to ask for it and seek it, but it is near, it is here. You don't have to be a superspiritual person, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, a person of great faith, you just have to go to Jesus. You just have to go to Jesus.

And that is the one thing the people did do who were surging around the house. They went to Jesus. They called out to Jesus. They didn't grin and bear it. They didn't suck it up. They didn't say, "I am not going to bother God with this. I can handle this myself." They went to Jesus. He is the available God.

Jesus never gives out. He never burns out. He never gives up. He is available. When you wake up in the middle of the night, Jesus is there by his Spirit. You can meet him in the dark at 3am. When you are in your car, Jesus is there by his Spirit. When you are depressed, when you are lonely, when you are somewhere you shouldn't be, doing something you shouldn't be doing, Jesus is there. He is persevering. I think of people who Jesus has been pursuing for years, maybe some of you. People with unbroken wills. People who have refused to bow the knee and say, "I give up. You have been after me and after me. And now I give up." I think of people Jesus has gone after for years and who have refused to bow the knee and get off the throne and say, "I give up." But that is who Jesus is – the infinitely available, infinitely persevering God.

Now, Jesus was God come in the flesh. Jesus is fully God. Jesus is as much God as God the Father. Jesus is the second person of the godhead – God the Son come in human flesh. And as the creed says, he is fully God and fully man. Infinitely available and yet when Jesus walked on earth, he took on our human limitations of body and energy. How did Jesus keep going without totally burning out?

[Slide #4]

Mark 1:35-39

“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: ‘Everyone is looking for you!’ Jesus replied, ‘Let us go somewhere else—to nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.’ So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.”

Again, let me set the scene here so we can see how a healer maintains his heart. The setting is very early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, while everyone else was still asleep. Jesus wakes up and tiptoes by the other sleeping people. Jesus in sensitivity getting up and tiptoeing out of the house so as not to disturb anyone so that he could be in his father’s presence outside. Just so that he could spend some time in relationship with his father. Do you ever do that? While everyone else is asleep tiptoe out of bed and go downstairs just so that you can be with God? You are not necessarily upset about anything. You are not necessarily facing a major crisis.

It is not necessarily that you are sick or that any of your loved ones are sick – you just have a need for God.

Why does the healer, in this case, Jesus in his humanity, have a need for God and why does he have a need to get up early in the morning and get away to be alone with God? And why do you need that? Why do you need to get up in the morning and get alone with God? To take a walk or to kneel down in your room or in your study or to sit in a chair and sip some coffee and just be with God. Why do you need that? You don't need a drink or more entertainment or sex. Why is it that whether you recognize it or not, you need to be alone with God? Why did Jesus need that?

The first thing I think we see here is that Jesus needed to get alone with God in order to maintain his sense of calling. He had this awesomely successful evening of ministry and the disciples thought they knew what the next step was for Jesus.

“Things are really moving now. We know what needs to happen now. We are going to get some bands and floats and put your name up all around Galilee. The next time, the crowds are going to be even bigger. You think last night was a success, wait until we get done with you. We will have you marketed, so packaged, so sold that there isn't going to be anyone in the Roman Empire who hasn't heard of you.”

It says here in v. 36 that Simon and his companions went to look for him. Literally, it means they tracked him down, they hunted him down. When you have been successful, when things are going well in your life, there is no way for you to maintain a sense of what God is calling you to, a sense of what God is saying to you. If you are a success at anything, if you are a success in ministry, in business, in

teaching, in leading a woman's group, in helping with kids, in making money, in school, in music or the arts – trust me, you are going to have happen to you what happened to Jesus. People are going to be pressuring you regarding their view of what your future should be like.

You have heard the old modification of Campus Crusade's first spiritual law, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. Some fellow spun that and said, "God loves you and other people have a wonderful plan for your life." And if you are a success, I guarantee you that just like the disciples had a plan for Jesus' life, people will come and clamor and press you into their view of what you ought to be doing with your time and talents. There is no way apart from time alone with God that you can maintain a sense of calling, responding not to the demands of others, but responding to the demands of God.

David McKenna is a seminary professor. He was the president of a seminary out in Seattle. One time, he writes in his book, he invited Billy Graham to be the commencement speaker at Seattle Pacific University. Commencement was a grand occasion. They rented the Seattle Opera House. They had a capacity crowd. So David McKenna pulls out all the stops and glamorized the invitation to Billy Graham. Graham listened for a moment and then answered, "David, I am flattered by your invitation, but I must say no. See, God has called me to be an evangelist, preaching the gospel to sinners. I would find it a joy to be with you knowing that I would be among Christian friends, but if I said yes, I would have to turn down an invitation to preach where other men have not preached."

So Jesus as a result of praying was able to say no, thanks for your plan for my life, but no. I have spent enough time alone with God to be clear about my calling. I need to go to some other towns.

It wasn't necessarily a bad thing that they were asking him to do. It was a good thing. But maintaining clarity about calling means that you turn down good things to respond to God things.

Of course, part of the reason we need to go to God is just to maintain our own souls. Jesus had just spent an exhausting evening of ministry. And it doesn't matter if you succeed or fail, you will be depleted after ministry. In fact, after success is often the time that I need to pray. Because after something goes really well – we had a great service, a great conference, a really wonderful ministry time, big baptism, whatever, that is the time when I am most opened up to spiritual warfare because I am spiritually depleted. Your resources are down after a time of success. People think that you are most vulnerable when you are low. The Bible teaches that the person who is most vulnerable is the one who is at the height. The one who is enjoying great success in career. Things are going really well. Often when things are going really well, your spiritual resources can be really low.

Here is a prayer from Martin Luther, the teacher and pastor who ignited the Reformation. He prayed:

[Slide #5]

“Behold Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, fill it. I am weak in the faith; strengthen me. I am cold in love; warm me and make me

fervent that my love may go out to my neighbor. I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust you altogether. O Lord, help me.”

That is the position, which is the sense of need that drives someone to crawl out of bed early in the morning and tiptoe downstairs to be alone with God. The fact is, friends, that in the US we spend so much time taking care of our bodies, making sure that our bodies are fit and well-fed, well-groomed and clean, perfumed and well-clothed, and comfortable and heated and air-conditioned and tanned. In the US right now we spend so much time cultivating our bodies and so little time maintaining our souls.

The common American complaint right now across the country is why is it that when the economy is doing so well, we feel so badly? There is more depression in the US right now than there has ever been. There are more psychiatric problems than there has ever been. There is more dissatisfaction, more loneliness.

Jesus said, “You can gain the whole world and lose your soul.”

If you are unattached to God, if you are not leaning into your relationship with God, Jesus said you are like a branch cut from a tree. It is no wonder that you feel dried up and empty despite all the success.

I think Jesus went to be with God just to maintain his friendship with God. Prayer is not just a matter of putting a list of petitions before God and saying, “Please do this and please do this and that.” Jesus went to be with his father to maintain relationship. For me the word that connects with me is just friendship. I really want Jesus to be my best friend in the world. I want to talk with Jesus about

things that I wouldn't talk with anyone else about. I want to enjoy Jesus' presence. I want Jesus' thoughts and counsel to shape the way I am. I want to talk to Jesus the way I would talk to a really good friend. As if we were sitting down and having a cup of coffee or lunch together – just the enjoyment of being with each other. That is what your relationship with Jesus is supposed to be like.

You say, "Well, how can I have that kind of relationship?"

Part of friendship is being honest. C.S. Lewis once said:

[Slide #6]

"We must lay before him what is in us, not what ought to be in us."

With really good friends, you tell them where you are, not where you think you ought to be, what you should feel like. With a good friend, you tell them where you are. And with a good friend you talk with them about the small things in life, not just the big things. I love C.S. Lewis' line:

[Slide #7]

"Those who do not turn to God in petty trials will have no habit of such resort to help them when the great trials come, so those who have not learned to ask Him for childish things will have less readiness to ask Him for great ones. We must not be too high minded. I fancy we may sometimes be deterred from small prayers by a sense of our own dignity, rather than of God's."

You don't just talk to friends about great concerns. You talk to friends regarding the little things, regarding your kids or little joys, victories or trials.

And I think being alone with God maintained Jesus' ability to continue risking. God wanted Jesus to move out to other towns.

When you are successful the real temptation is to stay put. And so many Christians filling churches are so secure, so afraid of change, so afraid of a new thing that God wants to do. The only way to maintain a risk-taking heart is to get alone with God. When you are alone with God, he liberates you inside to believe for a new adventure. In worldly terms we are doing great as a church. We are growing and everything is good and morale is high. It would be so easy for us to stop here. Let's just settle here. Let's not change anything or rock the boat. Let's not engage in a really big challenge. Let's just keep running over the same lessons year after year, going at the same paces. Why build a big new building? It is so risky.

Because when you get alone with God, when you really get alone with God, you discover that God wants us to push out the borders. Now is the time for a job change. Now is the time to train for a new career. God wants to widen our horizons individually and as a church. God wants us to see so much farther, to believe for so much more than we are presently experiencing. We just won't have the heart for risk if we are not alone with God.

Finally, I see in this chapter of Mark a demonstration of the Healer's heart. Real quickly,

[Slide #8]

"A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean.' Immediately the

leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: 'See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.' Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere."

You see Jesus conquering religious and social taboos in healing the leper. In the society at that time people with leprosy had to go around with unkempt hair and torn clothing crying out, "Unclean, unclean." Philip Yancey in his book, "Where is God When it Hurts" singles out leprosy as the most hopeless of all diseases. Of all the diseases, leprosy reverses the pain process. Most diseases have pain as an early warning signal that helps in healing. Leprosy is just the opposite. The disease destroys the signal system for pain so that it leaves the body without its natural protection against self-destruction. A leper can be burned or cut or broken without the warning of pain. Skin falls off, fingers, arms, toes, legs die and drop away in defiance of the normal process of the body to heal itself. In the absence of pain, the leper loses hope for healing. And leprosy is a hopeless social disease. Because lepers are so grotesque, people shun lepers and send them into exile. It is one thing to be terminal; it is another thing to be terminal when you are in isolation, to be terminal alone.

Jesus just breaks through all the social isolation, all the religious isolation, all the hopelessness. The Healer reaches across so many different barriers. He conquers those things and rolls them down. And the motive of the Healer is always the same.

It is compassion. You know, there is nothing Jesus can't conquer. I know many homosexual men and women who are hopeless, they feel they can't change. But Jesus, our healer, can conquer your sexuality and your feeling. Some folks have chronic problems asthma, scoliosis or M.S. Jesus, our healer, can conquer that.

It says in v. 41, "filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man." Filled with compassion. Divine healing results from the deepest place of feeling humanly that we can have. Think of all the feelings a person can have – they can be happy, sad, mad, disappointed, laugh, be surprised, be impatient, be depressed. Of all the feelings that a person can have, compassion is the deepest feeling. It is the truest and closest connection that we can have with God.

The word compassion comes from a Greek word and literally means the bowels, the intestines – we would say the guts. When Jesus is moved with compassion, he feels something for another from his guts. He enters so deeply into the suffering of the leper that it is as if he has the problem. It is not just that he feels sorry for a person, that is too superficial, knowing how the person feels with his mind. He feels the feeling.

I remember when my son, Dan, was 2 or 3 years old. His pediatrician totally misdiagnosed a case of strep that Dan had. He said that he had a virus and didn't give him any medication. He never checked for strep. Dan continued to be sick. My wife, Marlene, called and the physician kept putting her off. Dan finally came down with Scarlett Fever. He couldn't walk. His joints were really, really bad. Finally, the doctor looked at him again and said, "Basically, I missed it." Then they were concerned about there being kidney damage. So we had to take this little boy down

to Children's Hospital and he had to be strapped down to get this kidney test where they pumped him full of dye. I remember him lying there on this table, watching my son lying there on this table, strapped down and having a tube stuck in him. The dye made him sick and he threw up. He was so miserable. In my heart I was just praying to God. I remember saying, "Lord, if there is any way for me to take his place, Lord, if it would make any difference, just let all of this fall on me. But please, don't let my son continue to be sick or to suffer."

The leper doubted the heart of the healer. He wasn't sure Jesus wanted to heal. That's how I often feel. Do you really want to do this Lord? Our expectancy must shift from Christ never or rarely wanting to heal to Christ often wants to heal. Jesus is compassionate.

That is the compassion of Jesus. "Father, lay their sickness and their sin and their hurt on me. Put it all in my account," Jesus says. "Don't let my children suffer." When you go to God for healing, you are going to a God who is absolutely compassionate and who just takes the stuff on himself.

And it costs God. As a result of praying for this fellow, Jesus couldn't enter a town anymore. He had to stay away from the cities. But our divine healer is willing to pay the cost of rescuing one person, even if it means that he himself has to suffer.

Let me ask you a question. Do you know the heart of the Healer? When you approach Jesus, do you know him as the available God? As someone who just wants to be your friend? Someone you could talk to about little or big things? Someone you would want to get alone with early in the morning? Do you know the heart of

the Healer? Do you know his compassion? His desire and willingness to take on anything negative in your life and put it in his account?

Do you know the heart of the Healer? Let's pray.