BEYOND SUFFERING
A Christian View on Disability Ministry

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According to His Compassion

By Dr. John MacArthur

The God of Scripture is the one true constant in all the universe: "I the LORD do not change" (Malachi 3:6).[1] His temperament and his thoughts are as immutable as his eternal character. Specifically, he does not alter his Word, revise his will, revoke his promises, or change his mind: "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Numbers 23:19).

The necessary implication of God's immutability is that he is not subject to shifting moods, flashes of temper, fluctuating dispositions, or seasons of despondency. In theological terms, God is *impassible*. That means he cannot be moved by involuntary emotions, suffering, pain, or injury. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith (2.1), God is "infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or *passions*."

Steadfast, Not Stony

Divine impassibility is not an easy concept to grasp. Robert Ingersoll, the famous 19th-century skeptic, wrote, "Think of that!—without body, parts, or passions. I defy any man in the world to write a better description of nothing. You cannot conceive of a finer word-painting of a vacuum than 'without body, parts, or passions.'"[2] Nowadays even some Christian theologians shun the idea of divine impassibility because they think it makes God seem cold and aloof.

But that's a false notion. To say that God is not vulnerable, that he himself cannot be hurt, and that he isn't given to moodiness is not to say he is utterly *un*feeling or devoid of affections. On the contrary, Scripture says "God is love" (1 John 4:8). His compassion, his lovingkindness, and his tender mercies endure forever. The divine affections are more real, more sure, and more trustworthy than any human emotions could ever be. In fact, the constancy and infinity of God's tender affections epitomize why divine impassibility is such a wonderful truth. "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is [his] faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22–23).

The main problem in our thinking about these things is that we tend to reduce God's attributes to human terms, and we shouldn't. We're not to imagine that God is like us (Psalm 50:21). His affections, unlike human emotions, are not involuntary reflexes, spasms of temper, paroxysms of good and bad humor, or conflicted states of mind. He is as deliberate and as faithful in his loving kindness as he is perfect and incorruptible in his holiness.

The unchangeableness of God's affections is—or should be—a steady comfort to true believers. His love for us is infinite and unshakable. "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him" (Psalm 103:11). And his constant mercy is a secure and dependable

anchor—both when we sin and when we suffer unjustly. "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him" (v. 13). Far from portraying God as unsympathetic and untouched by our suffering, Scripture stresses his deep and devoted compassion virtually every time it mentions the unchangeableness of God.

Notice that I have quoted almost entirely from Old Testament texts to establish the connection between God's compassion and his immutability. The commonly held notion that the Hebrew Scriptures portray God as a stern judge whose verdicts are always unrelentingly severe is an unwarranted caricature. The tender mercies of God are a persistent theme throughout the Old Testament. From beginning to end the entire Bible presents God as "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love . . . good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made" (Psalm 145:8–9). In fact, God's loving kindness is often given particular stress in the very places where his fiery wrath against sin is mentioned. (See, for example, Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 77:7–10; Isaiah 54:8; 60:10; Habakkuk 3:2). Even the prophets' most severe threats and harshest words of condemnation are tempered with reminders of God's inexhaustible kindness and sympathetic mercy (Jeremiah 33:5–11; Hosea 14:4–9).

Of course, there's a careful balance that must be maintained here. It is neither wise nor helpful to pit the divine attributes against one another as if they were contradictory (they are not)—or to act as if God's merciful attributes automatically overruled the gravity of divine justice (they do not). "Note then the kindness *and* the severity of God" (Romans 11:22). *All* God's attributes are equally—and infinitely—exalted in Scripture.

It is a serious mistake, for example, to pit God's power *against* his tenderness or imagine that his righteousness conflicts with his mercy.[3] It is a particularly egregious error to think God's loving kindness toward sinners simply cancels out his wrath against sin. Don't dream for a moment that divine mercy eliminates the threat of God's judgment. God would be unjust if he did not punish evildoers.[4]

The converse is true as well, and this is the salient point: God's power cannot be correctly understood apart from his benevolence. In fact, God's power is best seen in his tenderness toward the helpless, because his power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The True Meaning of the Gospel

Of course, God's fullest self-revelation came in the Person of Jesus Christ—God in human flesh. The incarnation itself was an expression of sympathy and identification with our weakness (Hebrews 4:15). In Christ we can see countless expressions of divine compassion translated into human idioms that we easily understand and identify with—including sadness, sympathy, and tears of sorrow. Though sinless himself, Jesus suffered all the *consequences* of sin in infinite measure—and in so suffering, he identifies with the misery of all who feel the pains of human anguish. This was the whole reason God the Son became a man to begin with: "He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:17–18). "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (4:15).

Those statements show that divine mercy extends far beyond empathy merely for our physical sufferings. Of course, the loving kindness of God *includes* a heartfelt concern for our temporal, earthly, physical welfare—but it is infinitely *more* than that. Both the compassion of God and the earthly work of Christ must be seen ultimately as redemptive. In other words, our Lord's most tender mercies are concerned primarily with the salvation of our souls, not merely the suffering of our bodies.

Nevertheless, because illness, disability, pain, and all other forms of physical suffering are effects of the fall and fruits of the curse of sin, God's sympathy for the human plight *includes* a special grace toward

those who suffer physically. We see vivid evidence of that in the healing ministry of Jesus. Physical healing was not the central point of his earthly mission. He came, of course, "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10)—to provide redemption and eternal life for sinners. His one message was the gospel, beginning with a call to repentance (Matthew 4:17) and culminating in the promise of eternal rest for weary souls (11:29). But along the way, he encountered multitudes of sick, lame, blind, and other physically-suffering people. He healed "every disease and every affliction among the people" (Matthew 4:23; cf. 15:30–31), including congenital disabilities (John 9; Mark 7:32–35); chronic, medically hopeless cases (Luke 8:43–47); and cases of severe demon possession (Mark 5:1–16).

Those physical healings were vivid displays of both Jesus' power and his compassion. They were proof of his deity and living demonstrations of his divine authority. They established his unlimited ability to liberate anyone and everyone from the bondage, the penalty, and the consequences of sin. As such, the healing ministry of Jesus was illustrative of the gospel message, a true expression of divine compassion, and a definitive verification of his Messianic credentials. But physical healing was neither the central point of his message nor the main purpose of his coming. Again, he came to make propitiation for sin and to purchase redemption for sinners. And he did that by suffering in their place—dying for their sins.

The *gospel*, then, proclaims the way to forgiveness, redemption, a right standing with God, and the gift of eternal life. The gospel is not a guarantee that earthly suffering will be banished from our experience. It does not promise immediate or automatic healing from every physical affliction. In fact, suffering itself can be a grace by which we are perfected—molded into the perfect likeness of him who suffered in our place (1 Peter 1:16–17). "It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Philippians 1:29). And "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

That is why no televangelist or self-proclaimed faith healer today can really heal the way Christ and his disciples did. It is not that Christ has changed or that the power of God has somehow diminished. The problem is that the so-called faith-healers themselves have misconstrued the gospel.

The true meaning of the gospel is bound up in an accurate understanding of that famous prophecy in Isaiah 61:1–3, which Jesus read aloud in the synagogue in Luke 4:18: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." "The poor" whom he promised to bless are "the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). The "captives" to whom he proclaims liberty are "those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Hebrews 2:15)—meaning those who are in bondage to sin (Romans 6:17). The "blind" who recover their sight are those who "turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins" (Acts 26:18). And the "oppressed" who are set at liberty are those who were formerly under the oppression of sin and Satan (Acts 10:38).

In other words, what the gospel announces is something that the physical healings merely symbolized; something more vital, more lasting, more momentous, and more real than temporary relief from the pains of earthly affliction. The gospel gives us the only true, abiding remedy for sin and *all* its guilt and repercussions.

Furthermore, because we gain so many eternal benefits from our earthly sufferings, the mercy that sustains us *through* our suffering is actually a greater mercy than if God simply erased every trace of hardship or difficulty from our lives. To put it plainly, instant healing would not be spiritually as valuable to us as the all-sufficient grace that cares for us in the midst of our suffering (2 Corinthians 12:910). "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (4:16–18).

Still, because we know God never changes, we can say with absolute certainty that his heart is full of

compassion for those who suffer. Our lives and ministries should reflect that compassion as well— especially toward those who are burdened with relentless physical agony in this life. We cannot proclaim the love of God faithfully if we neglect that duty.

A Lesson from David and Mephibosheth

The Old Testament furnishes a wonderful, practical, real-life illustration of Christlike compassion in the account of David and Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth was a grandson of Saul who was permanently disabled. From a human perspective, he seemed the least likely person on earth for David to befriend and show kindness to. He was the sole surviving male heir of Saul, the one person left on earth who might have tried to claim that the throne belonged to him by birthright. He was living in exile when David found him—forgotten, fearful, and essentially an outcast. He did not seek David's favor, nor did David have any legal obligation to him. Yet David showed him extreme kindness in a way that epitomizes Christ's love and perfectly reflects what Christian ministry to hurting people should look like.

Here's how it came to pass:

David and Saul could hardly have been more different. Saul, towering, stately, physically robust, had been the people's choice to be Israel's king, but he had failed miserably and sinned egregiously, so God rejected him. God's choice to be his successor (and to establish the kingly line that would eventually produce Israel's Messiah) was David, small in stature, still in his youth, shepherding his father's flocks when Samuel anointed him as king. Of course, Saul knew full well that God had rejected him and blessed David. Saul's murderous contempt for David was well known. But David did not respond in kind.

Although David demonstrated repeatedly that he had no intention of wresting the throne from Saul by stealth or by force, Saul was paranoid about David—and the paranoia eventually drove him mad. He pursued David relentlessly with the aim of killing him. Saul thus squandered his power and his kingly authority, opposing God. This continued for years, until Saul's armies were defeated, Saul himself was mortally wounded by the Philistines, and he finally fell on his own sword. All but one of Saul's sons died at the hands of the Philistines in that same battle (1 Chronicles 10:1–6). "Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together" (1 Samuel 31:6).

One of Saul's sons who died that day was Jonathan. Even though Saul had made himself David's sworn enemy, Jonathan had become David's closest earthly friend. In the wake of that disastrous battle with the Philistines, David mourned greatly not only for Jonathan but also for Saul (2 Samuel 1:17). That David would have any compassion at all toward Saul or his family was extraordinary. Saul made David's life enormously difficult for years, forcing him into nomadic exile, causing David to live in caves and on the run. Moreover, even when Saul died, the transfer of power from Saul to David wasn't a smooth one. Saul's one surviving son, Ish-bosheth, was wrongfully anointed by Abner as king in his father's place (2 Samuel 2:8–9). The confusion caused by that foolish act briefly split the kingdom (v. 10), foreshadowing the permanent breach that would occur in the time of Jeroboam. But Ish-bosheth's challenge to David's throne ended just two years later, when Ish-bosheth was assassinated by his own captains (4:5–7). David was displeased by the treachery of the assassins and had them executed (vv. 9–12).

David's response to Saul's death and his reaction to Ish-bosheth's murder starkly contrast with the conventions of the time. It was common for Middle Eastern kings in circumstances like David's to kill off all surviving family members from the previous dynasty in order to prevent any threat of insurrection and eliminate all other possible claimants to the throne. It is significant that David's behavior toward the house of Saul was the exact opposite. He had made a covenant with Jonathan years before, promising that he would extend his loving kindness to Jonathan's offspring and preserve them as Jonathan had done for David (1 Samuel 20:15–16). That is precisely what he did.

And that is why in 2 Samuel 9, we read an extended account of David's kindness to the one remaining

descendant of Jonathan, a disabled son named Mephibosheth. That part of the story begins when David, conscious of the covenant he had made with his friend, asked, "Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (v. 1).

It so happened that "there was a servant of the house of Saul whose name was Ziba, and they called him to David. And the king said to him, 'Are you Ziba?' And he said, 'I am your servant.' And the king said, 'Is there not still someone of the house of Saul, that I may show the kindness of God to him?' Ziba said to the king, 'There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet'" (vv. 2–3).

The story of how Mephibosheth became disabled is told five chapters earlier, in 2 Samuel 4:4. There we read that "Jonathan, the son of Saul, had a son who was crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel [i.e., the news of their deaths], and his nurse took him up and fled, and as she fled in her haste, he fell and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth." In the confusion, Mephibosheth's nurse, who was trying to usher him to safety, dropped him (or he fell) and somehow both his feet were seriously injured. Perhaps his ankles were broken or the feet themselves crushed. Either way, the injury resulted in a permanent disability to Mephibosheth, who for the rest of his life would be unable to walk normally or earn a living for himself.

It was not until David had finally defeated the Philistines and ascended to the throne without rivals that he inquired about Saul's offspring. By then, evidently, some years had elapsed, and Mephibosheth was living "in the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, at Lo-debar" (2 Samuel 9:4). Enough time had gone by that now Mephibosheth was old enough to have a young son of his own (v. 12). Lo-debar was east of the Jordan, and it is very likely that Mephibosheth had gone into hiding there precisely because he (or whoever was his guardian in childhood) had been afraid David would come after him.

Instead, David requested that Mephibosheth be brought to him. "And Mephibosheth the son of Jonathan, son of Saul, came to David and fell on his face and paid homage. And David said, 'Mephibosheth!' And he answered, 'Behold, I am your servant'" (v. 6).

David immediately made it clear to Mephibosheth that his intentions were entirely merciful, borne out of his love for the boy's father. "David said to him, 'Do not fear, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan, and I will restore to you all the land of Saul your father, and you shall eat at my table always'" (v. 7). This was amazingly generous. David not only made provision for Mephibosheth's physical and material needs (vv. 9–11), but in effect he adopted him. "Mephibosheth ate at David's table, like one of the king's sons" (v. 11).

Mephibosheth's response reflects the shame he bore and the unusual humility that is often characteristic of people who have lived as social outcasts for many years: "What is your servant, that you should show regard for a dead dog such as I?" (v. 8). "Dead dog" was, of course, a term of extreme contempt. To call someone a "dog" in that culture was bad enough. To call someone a "dead dog" implied double uncleanness. This was just about the worst imaginable term of derision, and Mephibosheth applied it to *himself*. He had no sense of significance whatsoever—most likely because of his crippling injury and because he had been an outcast, in isolation for years. He was unaccustomed to favorable treatment from anyone, much less the powerful and popular king whom Mephibosheth's own grandfather had relentlessly persecuted.

By right, David could have taken over everything that belonged to Saul. He was the new king. Instead, he gave Saul's possessions back to Mephibosheth and put Saul's one-time servant Ziba, his sons, and his servants in Mephibosheth's employ: "You and your sons and your servants shall till the land for him and shall bring in the produce, that your master's grandson may have bread to eat" (v. 10). That verse also records that Ziba had 15 sons and 20 servants, so 35 men immediately went to work to cultivate Saul's land! It established a lucrative business for Mephibosheth.

Scripture is careful to record that it came to pass exactly as David decreed: "Ziba said to the king, 'According to all that my lord the king commands his servant, so will your servant do.' So Mephibosheth ate at David's table, like one of the king's sons. And Mephibosheth had a young son, whose name was Mica.

And all who lived in Ziba's house became Mephibosheth's servants. So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate always at the king's table" (vv. 11–13).

Then we have an amazing postscript at the end of the chapter, reiterating what verse 3 already told us: "Now he was lame in both his feet" (v. 13). The reiteration of that fact conveys a tone of amazement. Indeed, from a human perspective it is remarkable that the grandson of David's enemy, already living the life of a fugitive and an outcast, utterly lacking in any rudimentary form of self-respect—someone who had nothing whatsoever to offer David in the way of service or honor—would not only be accepted by the King himself, but also elevated to a position of highest privilege in the royal household, alongside David's own sons.

David's mercy, love, and kindness toward Mephibosheth are exemplary. It epitomizes the grace Jesus showed to outcasts of society during his earthly ministry, and it is an example every Christian should follow in our ministry to our culture's outcasts—including disabled, disadvantaged, and otherwise disempowered people who are our neighbors.

Notice carefully that David's mercy to Mephibosheth was not a token expression. He did not merely write an encouraging letter or make a one-time gift of alms. He gave his heart to Mephibosheth. He shared the palace with him; he gave up his own resources for him; he gave his life to him. He brought him into the palace, set him up in business, and made him one of his own.

Why did he do this? It was not only because of his love for Jonathan. The language of verse 3 is important: "Is there not still someone of the house of Saul, that I may show *the kindness of God* to him?" He consciously wanted to exemplify *God's* kindness.

That is precisely what he did. David's actions are the very picture of God's grace to sinners. Just as David showed kindness to Mephibosheth for the sake of Jonathan, God is generous to believers for Christ's sake. In other words, all the benevolence and tender mercies God bestows on us are given to us *not* because we deserve his favor. We *don't* deserve it. But because we belong to Christ by faith, we are the recipients of divine blessings that rightfully belong to him. That's what grace is all about.

An Explicit Command from Christ

We can't leave this chapter without pointing out that showing mercy to the weak and infirm is the duty of every believer. "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8, NKJV).

In Luke 14:12–14 Jesus gave us a direct instruction that stands as a mandate not only for the church but for each individual believer. He said, "When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just." Could that possibly be more clear? I don't see how.

Jesus is saying that if you are hosting a celebration or a feast, you shouldn't invite only those who can pay you back by giving you a reciprocal invitation. Invite people who have no capacity to pay you back in any way. If you want to manifest the love and compassion of God, that is the way to do it. True Christlike generosity means showing kindness that can never be repaid. When you are lavish in giving to someone you know will be bountiful in return, that is not the generosity of God; that is the typical, shallow altruism of human self-interest. Only when you are generous to those who are powerless to reciprocate are you truly showing the generosity of God. And if you really want to enter into the *joy* of God, there is no better way.

That is a solemn command from Christ. It is a practical mandate that should characterize our relationships with others on a personal level, in the context of our families, and especially in our fellowship with other believers. Let that be the spirit that permeates our dealings with our neighbors.

Now put that command together with everything we have seen about the steadfast love of God; the redemptive purpose of God in showing compassion; the profuse generosity David displayed to Mephibosheth;

and (above all) the living example of Christ, who literally took our weakness and infirmities as his own in order to identify with us. If all those things illustrate the kind of compassion we're supposed to show to the weak and disabled in our communities, it seems shockingly, uncomfortably obvious that we as believers in Christ—both collectively and individually—need to do more than we are currently doing to reach out and minister to people in our culture who are disabled, weak, blind, poor, and living in distress. They are often overlooked by the rest of society. They must not be neglected by the church.

The church was not established as a country club or a fraternity house for fit, cool and stylish people. It is a fellowship of those who recognize their own fallenness and utter helplessness, who have laid hold of Christ for salvation, and whose main business on earth is showing other needy sinners the way of salvation. If we neglect to reach out *especially* to those who are blind, infirm, or otherwise disabled, then we are simply not being faithful heralds of the tender mercy of Christ.

Notes

1. All Scripture quotations, unless noted otherwise, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.
2. *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*, 12 vols. (New York: Dresden, 1900) 2:361–62.
3. Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel, for example, implied that the Old Testament stresses God's pity *over* His authority. "The reality of the divine is sensed as pathos rather than as power," Heschel wrote, "and the most exalted idea applied to God is not infinite wisdom, infinite power, but infinite concern." Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962), 311. Unfortunately, the Rabbi's language ("pathos *rather than* . . . power") badly skews the point. The Bible doesn't order the divine attributes in any kind of hierarchy ("the most exalted idea applied to God . . ."). Scripture ascribes power *and* pathos to YHWH in equal and infinite measure. For obvious reasons, our finite minds cannot fully apprehend the notion of infinitude, much less grasp how such disparate attributes can exist together in inexhaustible measure. Still, the right approach is to receive and fully affirm by faith what God has revealed about Himself, rather than trying to whittle grand biblical concepts down to easily-manageable ideas.
4. That, of course, is the very dilemma the gospel solves, revealing how God can justify sinners and still remain just (Romans 3:26). Christ bore the full weight of divine wrath against sin and thus paid the price of sin on behalf of those who believe in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). "Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other" (Psalm 85:10).

About the Author

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