

David Chaput de Saintonge considers Jesus as a model for whole person medicine

'The great physician'

key points

Recognising the difference between medical knowledge in Jesus' day and ours, the author, a PRIME tutor, suggests Jesus' healing ministry gives clear guidelines for the practice of whole person medicine today.

Jesus touches the untouchable and is touched by people's suffering, releases physically and socially and spiritually, and never condemns. Unafraid to do what is right, he is flexible, sensitive, and persistent. He looks for what is really going on underneath illness, is prepared to get his hands dirty, knows the healing power of words, and teaches students.

Noting Jesus never asks for payment, the author pays tribute to Christian colleagues in Eastern Europe who work for a salary insufficient to live on, because they look to Jesus as their role model.

Jesus is sometimes referred to as 'the great physician', but clearly his medical practice was quite different from ours. He had almost no effective drugs to call upon, surgery was extremely primitive and, in our terms, he was untrained. Clearly none of that would have made any difference to him. But we do not have his power, even though the Bible teaches us we do have access to it. Nevertheless, Jesus' healing ministry gives us some clear guidelines for the practice of whole person medicine today.

Jesus touches even the untouchable

Jesus frequently, but not always, uses touch as a means of healing. Patients with leprosy or extensive skin diseases were untouchable in his time, as were women with menstrual bleeding. Jesus is unconcerned with tradition or even with the laws of hygiene, and does what he knows is best to bring healing to the patient.

The dermatologist who taught me as a student emphasised the importance of touching the patient's damaged skin, even though it might not be strictly necessary for diagnostic purposes. The act of touching is a way of reducing the social and psychological distance between the doctor and the patient. It signifies acceptance and inclusion, and helps build relationships by reducing feelings of rejection and isolation.

Jesus is touched

Jesus is clearly moved by the suffering of others, both patients¹ and relatives. When Jesus saw Mary weeping for her dead brother '...he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled'.² Jesus is fully present when faced with the sufferings of others, and does not attempt to maintain a professional distance.

Jesus releases

Jesus describes the crippled woman he healed on the Sabbath as somebody who was 'bound' by Satan.³ Typically he releases his patients:

- physically from their illness⁴
- socially; eg lepers can now re-enter society
- and spiritually, as his patients accept forgiveness

He works for wholeness in body and mind and spirit. However, this also involves giving people back their free will, which is clearly not without its risks. The paralytic who was healed at the pool of Bethesda is later warned: 'See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you'.⁵ This suggests that, in spite of his release from a life of sickness, the man continued to make bad choices. Maybe he chose to continue in a sick role. We do not know.

I remember seeing two senior physicians leaving their outpatient clinics just before Christmas. One of

them carried a large pile of patient notes, the other a pile of gifts from grateful patients. The first doctor tended to see patients once or twice only and then discharge them, releasing them back to their homes and the care of their family practitioners when necessary. The other doctor tended to follow patients regularly for some time and of course they were grateful. I've no doubt that some needed to be followed carefully in hospital, but I suspect that others attended more for the doctor's benefit than for theirs. Doctors are for the sick, and not the sick for doctors. Freedom from disease is about restoring autonomy, which is incompatible with fostering dependence.

Jesus never condemns

He never condemns any of the behaviours of those who come to him for help and healing. The man at the pool of Bethesda gets a clear challenge and a warning not to continue with his previous behaviour, but he is not condemned for it.

Jesus is never afraid to do what is right

The story of Jesus healing on the Sabbath reminds us that he did what was right for his patients in the face of inappropriate rules and regulations. In the West we are increasingly constrained to follow rules and guidelines for patient management. These certainly have their place and have been shown, overall, to improve the standard of patient care. However, there are occasions where what might be right for the majority of patients will be inappropriate for an individual. Sabbath rest is a good principle, but Jesus knew when to step outside it.

Jesus is flexible

Jesus' flexibility shows itself in the way that he chooses treatments. Sometimes he touches patients, sometimes he doesn't; sometimes he uses mud on blind patients, sometimes he doesn't. Presumably these approaches reflect the individual needs of the patient. This is what you would expect from a God who knows each one of us by name.

Jesus is sensitive

He responds to need, not to status. Jesus' patients come from every part of society and include the very poor, the very rich, Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans – in other words, anybody who has need. Jesus respects his patient's need for privacy. This is not always possible when somebody approaches him in the middle of a huge crowd. However, on several occasions he takes care to protect the patient from the eyes of the crowd.⁶ Jesus is sensitive to the need to maintain his patients' dignity while he is treating them.

Jesus is persistent

Not all of Jesus' healing and miracles seem to have been instantaneous. He needs to put his hands twice on the eyes of one of his blind patients before his sight is restored.⁷ The Son of God is prepared to persist until his treatment goals have been achieved.

Jesus checks his patients for motivation

'Do you want to get well?' he asks the invalid of 38 years.⁸ He looks for what is really going on underneath the illness. He checks out people's treatment goals and what exactly they want to happen: 'What do you want me to do for you?'⁹

Jesus is not afraid to get his hands dirty

This is not just a question of using mud. It involves getting into religious and social situations which the more delicate and fastidious might avoid.

Jesus knew the healing power of words

Maybe the majority of Jesus' healing miracles involve the use of words. Sometimes, where the problem was demonic, that was the only healing modality used. However, his words were also used to reassure, to comfort and to strengthen.

Doctors are for the sick, and not the sick for doctors

Jesus taught medical students

The disciples were sometimes unable to cure patients and wanted to know why. Jesus tells them on one occasion: 'This kind [of deafness] can come out only by prayer'.¹⁰ His students have not chosen the right sort of treatment for this particular case and Jesus sets them straight. Teaching was the major part of Jesus' ministry, and here we see him combining healing with teaching.

Jesus' motive was not money

There is no record of Jesus ever having asked for any payment, and sometimes he didn't even get thanks.¹¹ Nevertheless, his physical needs and those of his disciples were supplied by those who followed and respected him.

I am humbled by the dedication of many of my Christian colleagues in Eastern Europe who work for a salary which is insufficient to live on. They do this because they are called to be doctors. They look to Jesus as their role model.

David Chaput de Saintonge was a physician at the Royal London Hospital and now works with PRIME (Partnerships in International Medical Education) as director of education



Photo: Welcome

references

1. Matthew 20:34
2. John 11:33
3. Luke 13:16
4. Luke 13:12
5. John 5:14
6. Mark 5:40; 8:23
7. Mark 8:22-25
8. John 5:6
9. Mark 10:51
10. Mark 9:29
11. Luke 17:15-18