

7 saving graces

Living Above the Deadly Sins

Steve DeNeff



Indianapolis, Indiana

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To my father.

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—Steve DeNeff, Christmas Eve, 2009

1

In Pursuit of the Dream A Passion for Wellness

Do you want to get well?"

The Son of God asked over two hundred questions in his ministry, which is remarkable when we consider that he, being omniscient, already knew the answers. This question, first uttered to a man paralyzed for thirty-eight years, was like all of the other questions Jesus asked. It was asked not because Jesus needed to know the answer, but because the person he asked did.

When Jesus asks a question, it does not matter who or how confident you are. You are probably not ready for it. What are you seeking? Where is your faith? Do you know what I have done for you? Who do *you* say that I am? What will a man give in exchange for his soul?

When anyone else asks you a question like this, the conversation is just getting started. But when it comes from Jesus, you can be sure the conversation has already been had in his mind.

Isn't that unnerving?

The Man at the Magic Pool

The paralyzed man was one of hundreds who lay around the magic pool called Bethesda, waiting for their luck to change. Every now and then, they believed, an angel would stir the waters, and when he did, the first one in the pool would be the lucky one. That person would be cured, relieved of pain, and free to start a new life.

But this man was paralyzed, or more accurately, “shriveled and wasting away.”¹ To be paralyzed in his culture meant you had done something wrong. You had offended the gods. You were being punished. Those who walked by pitied and avoided you, but mostly they wondered what you did to deserve this.

Like the others at the pool, this man was reduced to begging for his very existence. He was self-absorbed, desperate, defined by his disease, and angry at those with better luck. He lived on a shoestring and took advantage of everything he could get—whether from the government, the temple, the rich, or relatives who felt sorry for him. Maybe he sometimes bought a lottery ticket as a votive offering to the god of chance, or maybe he stole from the rich, thinking it was only fair. He was a type of modern man: He waited, tried, failed, quit, and then tried again.

The man didn’t really believe he would ever make it into the pool, and yet he couldn’t leave it. What if something were to happen? What if he got lucky? So he hung around—hoping, but growing more cynical all the time.

Then, one day, a man approached him and uttered a stupid and offensive question: “Do you want to get well?”

Ask a stranger who is blind if he wants to see. Ask someone with Muscular Dystrophy or rheumatoid arthritis if she wants to get over it. What would her response be? She would almost certainly consider your question intrusive and judgmental, as if you were implying she

didn't want to get better. Besides, it's none of your business. Proper etiquette is to say nothing. It is better to just smile and nod as you walk by and feel sorry for them.

Yes, the question could be considered offensive, and even more so because the day on which Jesus asked it was both a Sabbath and a festival day. Sabbaths and festivals were days of celebration and rest. Both were long-standing traditions that went back a few thousand years. Both were celebrated as part of the Jewish identity. Both traditions looked back, and both looked forward.

Sabbaths looked back to the days of Moses when God delivered his people and gave them the Law. Festivals, like the Day of Atonement or the feasts of tabernacles or Purim, all looked back to historic events that shaped Israel and proved her distinctiveness to God. A modern equivalent might be Independence Day—a celebration that looks back to the day when the nation was freed, even as it celebrates the ideals and dreams of that culture.

Sabbaths and festivals also looked forward to a day when the peace of Israel would be restored. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says they helped people “to imagine the world through the lens of that particular identity.” Festivals provided opportunities for the people of God to imagine again how everything would be in the end. Sabbaths and festivals spoke of order and peace, of hope and thanksgiving, and of joy. They were times to push reset, to pause and reflect on God's providence. Sabbaths and festivals were spent with family and were built around the quaint ideals of hope, contentment, and gratitude for all that was right. They were an opportunity to say, “It is well with my soul.”

So Jesus deliberately chose a day when all was supposed to be well and entered a place where nothing was well and asked the question: “Do you want to get well?”

Strangely enough, the man never answered the question. He only complained that the other people were beating him into the pool

whenever the waters were stirred. “The problem,” said the withered man “is not me, but them. They are always cutting in line. They get all the breaks. They’re the lucky ones.” So he sat and listened every few days to someone else’s testimony and watched someone else get healed. He was waiting on a dream. But maybe he was beginning to give up. Maybe he was growing cynical about all of these testimonies. Maybe he even hoped they would get sick again.

Still the question hangs in the air: “Do you want to get well?”

Well, do you? The question implies that there is such a thing as being well and that it is a condition quite different from your present one.

Getting Better vs. Getting Well

Jesus used a word that was different from the common word for healing. He used a word that means “whole” or “complete.” There are several words for healing in the gospels, and each writer has his favorite. The most common word for healing—*therapeuo*—means to make better, to improve, or to get over what ails you. Jesus deliberately chose a different word—*hygien*—to show that he had something more than “getting better” in mind. The word Jesus used means “sound” or “reliable.” It means to be “of good understanding . . . of good judgment . . . to be healthy [and] of sound mind.”³ It means “a proper balance of the whole.”⁴ In fact, he had wellness in mind.⁵ Jesus was not asking the man if he wanted to get better; he was asking him if he wanted to get well.

Physicians know just what he means. Years ago, while I was in the hospital with a virus, two doctors came to my room. After spending a few minutes with me, they left to discuss my case. They didn’t know it, but right after they left my room, I got out of bed and followed them down the hall to hear what they were saying.

“Well, his condition has certainly improved,” said the one.

Then the other said something quite curious I have never forgotten: “Yesterday, he was over the virus, but today he is ready to go home.”

The doctor was not referring to my state of mind. He was referring to my state of wholeness. He was talking about that point in the recovery process where relapse is no longer likely, where one’s energy and drive has been fully restored just like it was before. Everyone knows it—from doctors to patients to insurance companies—a person may get better long before they are well.

When we get better, we are over our symptoms. But when we are well, we get rid of the disease. When we get better, we quit fighting or quit saying mean things with our tongues. But when we get well, we reconcile. We restore the love and trust and loyalty that we had with one another before the fight. We use our mouths to build people up. We reach a peaceful resolution to the conflict or, when we cannot, we bear up under the injustice and continue to love and pray for those who persecute us.

So the question “Do you want to get well?” is not a stupid question at all. Indeed, there are many who are defined by their diseases. Recently I read of a woman who made headlines for refusing to treat her child’s deafness. Born deaf, like her mother, the child suffered a disease that doctors were certain they could cure with a simple surgery. But the mother refused, saying that deafness was not a disease but an identity. She said it was better for her child to remain deaf than to be subject to a world of distractions. To her, deafness was a better way to live, so she wanted neither pity nor help. She wanted only to be left alone.

Some who are spiritually deaf also defend their condition. They decide that, rather than be fooled by all the loud and confusing voices, they prefer to believe in nothing. They simply want to be left alone. They do not want to get well.

But most people do.

Most people really want to change. They want to be different; they just don't know where to begin. Most people are not rebellious so much as they are stuck. Many Christians were under the impression that once they were saved, all things would be new. But behold, all things are not new. Every day they wake up "saved" but with the same old instincts and habits. They are in the same tired relationships. It is not that they are faking their religion or even that they don't know how to change. It is that their old patterns are still too easy for them. Their old friends are still too familiar, their past too influential, their impulses too powerful, or their resolve too weak. Like the paralyzed man, they don't believe they will ever be cured, and yet they can't leave the pool. They act as if sin is too clever and too deep a problem to solve in this life. Yet there is something still in them that wishes they could somehow make it into the pool. All their lives they have heard someone else's testimony and seen someone else's miracle. So they hang around and get cynical while trying to retain hope.

Our culture is sick; even the physicians (theologians) themselves seem not to believe in wholeness anymore. They confess to sinning as though it were a badge of their genuineness. It is as though sin was a chronic disease—something you learn to live with and you treat for symptoms—and the church a mere hospice for patients who are terminal. Confession and penance are like pills a patient takes to treat the symptoms, but they do nothing for the disease itself. Many pastors and physicians are like pathologists who explain in great detail how the disease is killing us but have nothing to prescribe that kills the disease or even to keep it from flaring up again. If you doubt this, drive to the church nearest you and ask the pastor bluntly, "Do you think I will ever conquer sin in this lifetime?" As a doctor, he hates the disease and looks forward to a day when it is cured, but the harsh reality is that he has been up against it for so long that he is no longer optimistic. He has seen people who claimed to be cured, but who discovered later

that they were only in remission. The sin came back later with a vengeance. Sadly, our society is so soured by these things, that even though we are hooked on getting better, we have lost the idea of what it means to be well. We are at the same time sinner and saint—always repenting.

Then Jesus comes strolling into our fatalism with his preposterous question: “Do you want to get well?”

In our frustration, we command him to stop. “Do you know anyone who has stopped their sinning?” we ask, as though that were the end of the matter. Suddenly, our experience is the most important criteria. It’s a fair question, but it isn’t the first one to ask. There are others.⁶ Even if you doubt, as many do, that a cure for sin is possible in this life, there is something inside you that won’t let you leave the pool. Even as you grow cynical, you still wonder: Does Jesus mean what he said? Even if you can’t be whole, do you still wish that you could? Does your craving for wholeness imply that there is more out there for you? Is it really like God to offer you something you cannot have? Is Jesus capable of giving you what he offers? Even if you were the first one in the world to get it, could Jesus do it for you if he wanted? Does he want to?

I am writing in part to say, “Don’t give up the dream!” Stay near the pool. Keep asking the question. Don’t let someone else’s testimony make you cynical. Don’t be critical of someone else’s miracle. However long it takes, however frustrated you get, keep seeking your miracle. You probably need one. Miracles do not come at the whim of those seeking them, and they do not always come in a day. Miracles happen when Jesus “sees us,” and they happen to people who, like the paralyzed man, have stayed near the pool a long time. They happen to people who cooperate with whatever God is already doing in their lives, people who are willing to forego any pleasure, pay any price, or start any habit that they might be whole again.

Are the Holy among Us Still Sick?

This book is devoted to people who, like me, have been sick long enough and want to be well. Though I come from the holiness tradition and am sympathetic to its doctrine of sanctification, I am not interested in simply re-stating the party line. Though I have a bent toward a more theological approach to things and even claim to be sanctified myself, I do not want to write a new theology or convince you of a second work of grace. I am asking if you want to be well—and that is a different question. As for me, I want to live and die a Christian, and I want to take as many with me as I can. It is not the goal of this book to stake out theological positions or to debate the meaning of the “baptism in the Spirit.” I desire to see the effect of these things.

Theologically, I am somewhere between those who say you can never be well (in this life) and those who say they are well already. That is, I am well enough to despise my sickness, yet sick enough to call it something else. I believe in holiness—I understand it and I teach it—but this is no guarantee that I am holy. Even though I claim to be, the evidence does not lie in my claim but in the witness of God’s Spirit and in those places where I live out that witness in the fruit of His Spirit. So whatever your persuasion, if your heart and hunger are as mine, then—for the next two hundred pages—give me your hand.⁷

The book is designed to look more closely at a simple pattern for spiritual transformation which, as Robert Mulholland has put it, is “the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.”⁸ It takes time and sacrifice and discipline but, as my friend Mark Wheeter says, “Is there anything else in your life that you can get good at by doing nothing? Why do you expect that in your spiritual life?”⁹ I believe we are transformed by cooperating with the Holy

Spirit to overcome evil with good in our lives. As God infuses us with grace, we have the power to say no to ungodliness in all its subtle forms and to live upright and godly lives in this age (Titus 2:12). God's divine power gives us everything we need for life and godliness so that through his promises we can actually participate in his divine nature (2 Pet. 1:3–4). We can share God's attribute of holiness with him (Heb. 12:10). We can live as Christ to the world (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21). For God did not call us to be impure but to live a holy life (1 Thess. 4:7). So no lasting change can occur without a sustained discussion about sin and grace, vice and virtue.

We will begin by defining *vice* (Chapter 2) and *virtue* (Chapter 3) and then, in the heart of the book (Chapters 4–10), discover how each of the seven deadly sins—along with its opposite virtue or saving grace—competes for the same space in our lives. One premise of this book is that by God's grace, we can develop our virtue even though we are better at vice. Though we are sinful from birth, we have inklings, longings, and strange little habits reminiscent of grace. We have distant memories of a better day we never had, like phantom pain from a limb that never was. Thus, another premise is that our trouble with sin is not only what it does to our chances of heaven but what it does to our potential on earth. In sin we have grown old and no longer know how to have fun. A third premise is that sin is a very old and clever adversary and it pursues sinner and saint alike. It is no respecter of persons but is always crouching at the door, masquerading as something else, even something virtuous. But a fourth premise is that sin can be mastered in all of its forms. It can be gotten over, cured once and for all by a grace growing opposite it. As each grace grows, it displaces the contrary sin. However, the opposite is also true. As sin grows, it pollutes the soil once fertile for grace.

As one who is holy yet still getting over his sickness, think of me not as a physician but as a fellow patient in the same hospital who,

having been here awhile, has noticed some of the tendencies of our sickness and some of the patterns that lead to the cure. Along the way, I will share whatever I know of each and try to give general counsel that encourages and points toward wellness and life.

The feast of the Jews, the magic of the Greeks, the hope of all who lie helpless at the pool waiting for their luck to change is not found in religion at all. It turns out it is found in the one who is standing before you, perhaps even now, asking, “Do you want to be well?”

Notes

Chapter 1

1. The Greek word, *astheneia* means “a want of strength” or an “inability to produce results.” (See W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, eds. Merrill F. Unger and William White [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985], 324.) Darrell Bock says that, when referring to human beings it describes arms and legs as “shrunken, withered or wasted.” (See Darrell Bock, *The Bible Knowledge Key Word Study: The Gospels* [Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries, 2002], 291.)
2. Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 83.)
3. Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1986), 169.
4. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged by Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 1202.
5. To get an idea of how these two words, *therapeuo* and *hygien*, play against one another, think of the time Jesus healed the man with a withered hand (Matt. 12:10–14) and notice the Pharisee’s question, “Is it lawful to *heal* [*therapeuo*, to make better, to improve, to treat, or to cure the disease] on Sabbath?” Then notice Jesus’ response: “Stretch out your arm . . . and it was *completely restored* [*hygien*, “made well”] just as sound as the other” (emphasis added).

6. One such question is what the Bible itself teaches. New Testament scholar, Ken Schenck says, “There is no passage in the Bible that assumes a Christian will inevitably sin intentionally when faced with a clear-cut temptation.” Source: Personal e-mail to author: December 8, 2009.
7. See John Wesley’s sermon “Catholic spirit,” *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. V (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprinted), 492–504. Wesley pleads for a spirit of unity within diversity: “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? (493).” Wesley is not suggesting an indifference to doctrine or a “muddy understanding” or a “jumbling [of] all opinions together.” To the contrary, the person with the catholic spirit, whose hand I need and seek, “adheres to that worship of God which he judges most acceptable in his sight and, while he is united by the tenderest and closest of ties to one particular congregation, his heart is enlarged toward all mankind; those he knows and those he does not” (503).
8. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15.
9. Mark Wheeter, (sermon, Wesleyan Woods District Camp, Vassar, Mich., June 29, 2009).

Chapter 2

1. Arthur Falch, letter to the editor, *Christianity Today*, August 2007, 9.
2. Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 73.
3. Historian John McNeill writes, “Their authors were not original thinkers, but thoughtful and discriminating legislators of penance and advisers to those charged with the guidance of souls. By their use of ancient materials they helped to maintain in some vigor, through times of violence and moral disorder, the moral force of historic Christianity.” John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, reprinted 1965), 115.
4. Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Scribner, 1985), 216.
5. Aquinas’ work, of some three thousand articles and six hundred questions, is divided into three categories. The first is “the classic explanation of the system of theology held by the Roman Catholic tradition.” The other two categories are more pastoral, dealing with virtue and vice and with the use of seven sacraments as conveyers of God’s grace. See Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1967), 258.
6. Dante’s use of the seven deadly sins, following Aquinas’ list, is very clear but his attaching enemies to each of the sins is only alleged and has not been proven.
7. St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Doubleday, reprinted 1990), 37–60.
8. “The Seven New Deadly Sins,” www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1852747_1854195_1854179,00.html (accessed March 10, 2008).
9. Bob Davis, “Lagging Behind the Wealthy, Many Keep Up By Borrowing,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2005.
10. Kurt Anderson, “That was then . . . and this is now,” *Time*, April 6, 2009, 34.
11. *Ibid.*