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The Great Physician

By **FREDERIC NIEDNER**

WHEN God made man, He used the humblest material and made a supreme creature. Great artists have dipped their brushes into pigments and have painted upon canvas figures that seemed to live. God took the dust of the ground and made of it a body that really lived. And when the Creator had breathed into this body's nostrils the breath of life, man became a living soul. This man's body was fearfully and wonderfully made, perfect in its form and consummate in its functions. Man was possessed of health from head to foot, in mind and body. There was no inherited susceptibility to disease; there were no weak organs open to the attack of germs; there were no nervous disorders to wreck the happiness of man's life. But after the entrance of sin into the world, death appeared upon the mundane scene, and death had as its frequent precursor and cause the many illnesses that it became the lot of man to bear and under which he had to suffer. As we page through the record of humanity as portrayed in the Bible, we find mention of many illnesses known to men: boils and fever, palsy and leprosy, dropsy and dysentery, ague and itch, epilepsy and emerods, besides blindness, deafness, lameness, and other infirmities of the human frame. For the treatment of disease there were physicians and medicaments, though there was not much to expect of either, as evidenced by the note in 2 Chronicles 16, where "King Asa was diseased in his feet until his disease was exceeding great; yet in his disease he sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians; and Asa slept with his fathers." Remedies for diseases were a lump of figs as a potent poultice for boils, ointments for bruises, oil and wine for wounds, wine for the stomach, and anointing with oil for various ailments. But most of the pains and distresses of the human body eluded the skill of physicians and defied the potency of remedies. Yet there was One, the Great Physician, who was Master of all the diseases of mankind, because He was the all-knowing and all-powerful Son of God, who came to this world of sickness to heal and to help.

In a day long before doctors knew that a solution of nitrate of

silver dropped into the eyes of a newborn infant would prevent *ophthalmia neonatorum*, Jesus gave the man who was born blind his sight. In a day long before the world knew anything about leper colonies and the use of chaulmoogra oil, Jesus cured men of the dreadful plague of leprosy. In a day long before men knew anything about diathermy Jesus said to the man sick of the palsy, "Take up thy bed and walk." Jesus was the Great Physician for the illness of humanity. The blind, the lame, the halt, the palsied, the deaf, the dumb, the lepers, the insane, all were brought to the Great Physician. He healed so many of them that if they were all written in a book, the world would not be large enough to contain it, in the hyperbolic statement of the writer of the Fourth Gospel.

Jesus is still the Great Physician for human ailments. No longer does He walk on the streets of cities and along the roads of the countryside, uttering healing words to afflicted men and women. But He is just as near to the sick today as He was in the day when He was in Capernaum. Jesus has promised to hear the prayers of the sick, and His promises do not fail. Many a devout Christian can testify that his earnest and fervent prayers availed much when he was in the misery of great illness. There have been men and women of whose recovery and life the best of physicians despaired and who attributed an unexpected recovery to the power of their prayer to the Great Physician. Many a faithful pastor, who really prayed as a man of God at the bedside of sick members of his flock, can testify to the power of Jesus that can be called on in the day of trouble. The pastor should make himself a bold and fervent man of prayer when he visits his sick people. He has the Doctor with him, at his beck and call. He can bring something to the sickbed that isn't found in the pharmacopoeia of the apothecary nor in the instrument bag of the surgeon. He can bring the Great Physician into the sickroom. Let the pastor be bold and fervent in his application to the Great Physician. Martin Luther was, in his prayer for Melanchthon, when he told the Great Physician in very definite language how much his valued co-worker was needed. The pastor may carry a prayer book with him to use in calling for the help of the Great Physician, or he may use the *Gebetschatz*

or Starck's Prayer Book or the *Hymnal* which he will often find near the bed of his sick members. Or the pastor may have, by much experience and much reading, learned the language of fervent prayer and may be able to pour out words which will assure the afflicted member that the Great Physician is truly near and will reach out His helping hand. Much has been said and written about the "Pastor at the Bedside" of sick members of his flock, about the pastor's personal preparation for this important task, about the manner of his approach to the patient, about the cheerfulness of his demeanor, about the tact that he must employ, about the length and frequency of his visits, and the subject matter of conversation that is carried on at the bedside. Above all, the pastor who ministers to the sick must perform the one greatest service to the sufferer — he must bring Jesus, the Great Physician, to his bedside. The power of Jesus will be present with the ministry of the pastor. Every sick Christian can pray to God himself and ask for healing; the Apostle Peter tells sick Christians to do this, but also to call for the pastor, the elder, of the church, to pray over him, and promises a great blessing as a result of that prayer.

The presence of the Great Physician is especially needed when the illness is not one of the physical body, of eyes and ears, legs and arms, stomach and heart, but when it is an illness of the mind, in cases of melancholy, despair, and erring conscience, fear, hallucinations, and the like. Uninitiated and inexperienced persons will strive to argue with such people in a vain effort to convince them that their harrowing thoughts and fears are entirely baseless, a futile method of attempted healing, because to the patient these fears and thoughts are so real that no amount of argument serves to dislodge them from the mind, but rather drives them deeper and more firmly into the tortured consciousness. The modern psychiatrist has his thousand questions by which he strives to uncover the hidden spring of the mental malady in some long-forgotten episode of the past and to substitute a new personality for the sick mind. The Christian pastor will do well to possess a knowledge of the working of the abnormal human mind and to be conversant with the methods of modern psychiatry and to employ such techniques as may be suggested by the case before him; but he will always remember that the Great Physician is his best Ally

and Counselor and that the cure of his patient lies in the hands of Jesus. And in very many instances the pastor will find that when a mentally disturbed person can be shown the love of God in Christ Jesus, can be brought to see that sins are all forgiven by a loving God through Christ, can be led to the assurance that he will go to heaven when he dies, a new peace will enter the heart and mind that before was in a furious turmoil. The pastor who visits the homes of the sick, the wards of hospitals and the detention areas of mental institutions, and brings to those to whom he ministers the ministry of Jesus, the Great Physician, he is performing the service to which God sent him, and he is being faithful in his divine office.

But the Great Physician does not specialize on diseases of the human body. He is greatly concerned with the welfare of the human soul. The purpose of His healing ministry is to save the soul. He came to save that which was lost. He came that all who believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. When the man sick of the palsy seemed to need first and above all healing for his afflicted body, Jesus first took care of his afflicted soul. Humanity is spiritually sick. The disease of sin has spread from its first development in Eden to epidemic proportions all over the world. It is a congenital malady with which every child born of father and mother comes into the world. The inoculation of education does not cure the malady. The prophylaxis of legislation does not halt its nefarious progress. But still there is balm in Gilead. There is a remedy for sin. Jesus has it. Jesus, the Great Physician, can heal the malady. By His death on the Cross He has attained a righteousness which will cover and cure sin for all who accept that righteousness by faith.

We who are pastors are continually dealing with sinning people. They come to us to ask for Holy Communion; they come to our services to make confession of their sins; they come to church to hear the comforting words of the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins; they come also to excuse their sins, to explain them away, to deny them. It becomes the duty of the pastor always to bring to sinners the Great Physician, to let Jesus talk to the sinner, to convince the sinner of the gravity of his soul's sickness, to warn the

sinner that the end of the path of his illness is his destruction, but to teach the sinner nevertheless that there is healing, pardon, forgiveness for all his transgressions. For the pastor, every contact with a human being can become a clinical examination and the discovery of a hidden malady. The hour of Communion registration can be a process of putting down names into the Communion book, but it can also be an hour of healing for souls, if the pastor knows how to call the Great Physician into that hour of registration. And there come occasions in the pastor's ministry that a man or woman burdened with a galling conscience comes to him to seek rest and quiet and assurance. It is then that the pastor has the glorious opportunity, not to exercise his own wisdom to alleviate the distress of one sinner, but to call in for consultation the Great Physician Jesus, whose words and spiritual remedies will bring joy and comfort to that aching human heart. Very often it becomes necessary to convince a person that he really has a sickness of the soul. They believe that their soul is well, that they need no remedy, that nothing need be done for them. They are self-righteous and self-satisfied. Jesus had these people in mind when He said, with a touch of irony: "They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." When the pastor is confronted with those who believe that they are whole and need no physician, it becomes his duty to bring them the physician for their sick souls. He will diagnose their case correctly and unmistakably by means of the Law of God, but he will be most concerned with bringing the Great Physician to the unrepentant sinner, so that he will see the heinousness and the damnableness of his sin, since it caused the death of the Son of God. The Law alone will not bring a sinner to repentance. The sinner can be convinced from the Law that he has done the things forbidden in the Law and that he has not done the things that are enjoined in the Law; but that recognition will not automatically make him sorry. His answer could be — yes, so what? But when the sinner is led to see the supreme sacrifice made by Jesus for the sins of the world, he will recognize the enormity of his guilt and will be drawn toward repentance and faith.

The Great Physician also turns His healing power to the world

in which we live. We are living in a world that is sick, a world that is in great pain, a world that is in great misery. God did not make the world that way. God made a world that was healthy and happy, a world that felt no pain, a world that knew no misery. God made a perfect world. When the last one of the eight creating commands had been uttered by the Maker of heaven and earth, a world had been created that had no flaw and no fault and no failing. It was all perfection. It was all very good. In no way at all could it have been made any better. It was an unimprovable world. Evolution could do it no good. There were no upward steps by which the world could, in the course of millions of years, become a better world through the process of organic evolution. A betterment and improvement of species by the survival of the fittest was impossible because all were fit, all were perfect. "All the parts of the universe as we know and see them today were present at the time of creation, but they were in a perfect form. . . . Sun and stars, mountains, animals, and plants were more beautiful, more perfect than they are now. Man's first world was the Garden of Eden, abounding in luscious fruit, with a crystal-clear river to water the garden, and shining gold and glistening gems in abundance to delight the eye and the heart. Man, the chief product of the Creator's art, was in perfect health, strength, and beauty. He was the lord of creation. All that God had made was subject to him. Man was created in the image of God. In the body and mind of man the qualities of God were mirrored. Man was holy and sinless and in possession of a perfect knowledge of God. Nothing disturbed the happiness of this perfect world. Weariness from labor came later, as did weeds and harmful insects. Locks and bolts and bars were not needed, for there was no greed and avarice and covetousness. There was no fornication and adultery, and nakedness aroused no evil desire." (*Die Herrlichkeit dieser und jener Welt*, E. Eckhardt.)

But, alas, this perfect world is no more. It is still a world that has not been doomed and destroyed by a Creator who complained that the earth was filled with violence and who said that He would destroy the earth and that the end of all flesh had come before Him. The world is still a world, but its perfection and purity are gone. It is an unhealthy world, a world that is sick. The whole creation

groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now, and not only they, but ourselves also, which have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.

One who is sick needs a physician. Our sick world needs a physician. There are those who are desperately sick but who refuse to have any physician. They will not believe that their illness is grave enough to warrant the attention of a physician. Or they do not believe that any physician is able to help them. There are those who believe that the world is not sick enough for the need of a physician. It's a good world, they say; there's nothing much the matter with it. They are blind to fearful crime portrayed by the newspaper, to the dreadful vices revealed by investigators into human conduct, to the alarming pictures of license and lewdness among people drawn on the pages of novels and shown on the screens of the moving picture, to the breakdown of the home, to the flimsiness of the marriage bond, to the insatiable greed that brings about flagrant episodes of dishonesty and plundering among the lowest and the highest in human society—they are blind to all that. It is a good world, and it needs no physician. Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may be dead.

On the other hand, there are many who would be the physicians of the world. There are many who propose powerful potions of their own concoction to heal all the ills of the world. As these physicians for the world's sickness hang out their spurious shingles, we feel as if we were in the Beaumont Building, where glass door after glass door tells you of the presence of aurists, ophthalmologists, neurologists, roentgenologists, ontologists, dermatologists down to urologists, all ready to cure the ills of humanity until the "cadaverologist" begins his work. For the economic ills of the world each political party has the remedy that will not fail. For the future economic security of the individual the insurance agent, the investment broker, and Dr. Townsend have the right answer. For the pangs of marital unhappiness the successors of Dorothy Dix have the miraculous cure. For vice and crime the legislators have new laws that will effectually curb all unsocial tendencies. For the youth problem there are ramified youth programs, tailored

to the needs of young people and providing them with healthful leisure-time occupations that will engage their energies in wholesome activities. Doctors without end for the illnesses of the world. This sick world needs a Great Physician, and there is *one* Physician for this sick world, Jesus, the Son of God, the Redeemer of the world. In His medical kit there is a potion for each one of the world's ailments. Jesus has the remedy for every ill. He has something for the alleviation of every pain.

If this sick world will submit to the therapy of Christ, then it will be on its way to a better condition of health. And whatever Christian people and Christian pastors do to bring the world to call in the Great Physician for its illness, will be the greatest benefit that man has accomplished for man. Lister and Pasteur gave the world release from the incessant ravages of diseases caused by germs; heroes among scientists have brought humankind relief from the onslaughts of many of life's enemies. But the Great Physician Jesus has the one powerful healing for the world's great ills. And it is our task, the task of the Christian, the task of the pastor, to persuade the world to call in the Great Physician for its ills.

Jesus did not come to this world to change the economic and social structures that men had developed. He came to bring healing of sickness, of life, to individuals. The Savior's ministry of healing was directed to individual people. He never did look over a great assembly of people and declare that all those who had any kind of sickness should forthwith be healed of all their various maladies. Once he healed ten men of leprosy. But he always dealt with individuals. All the stories of healing in the Gospels tell us that. Doubtless there were more people sick among the crowd in the house in Capernaum, but Jesus healed the man who was sick of the palsy. But the Great Physician also attends to the maladies that bring misery to mankind in this world.

At the bottom of much of the pain and travail that exists in the life of men and women and children is the breaking down of the home and home life. The family and the home are the basic units of society. In the normal home, character is formed, virtues are inculcated, warnings are given against misconduct that

are remembered and acted upon for a whole lifetime. But the home has ceased to exercise that function in many instances. It has become a place to eat and sleep, and to do both hurriedly, so one can get away again. There is little time and inclination for true home life. Even the Christian home has become less of an oasis that it should be in this sick world. There are many who recognize this and promote remedies for the unhappy situation; but we know that if we can bring Jesus into a sick home, a cure can be effected. The problem is to get the people in a home to let the Word of Jesus influence them, through family devotions, through friendly conversations about serious matters in life and through prayer. Jesus can be a Physician for a sick home, and it must be our constant endeavor to gain entrance for the Great Physician into the homes upon which we can have an influence. Our homes used to have mottos hanging on the walls — one of them was: *Wo keine Bibel ist im Haus, Da geht der Teufel ein und aus.* The surest way to save the home from destruction is to introduce Jesus to it, who can be the Head of the house, a Guest at every meal, and a silent Listener to every conversation.

The people of various nations are separated by oceans and barriers of language and custom, and time and again there has been bitter war and bloodshed. Our country has had to wage warfare against other nations, and the curse of armed conflict is felt in many different ways. No one wants war, yet it comes. Hatred and greed and lust bring it about. We are helpless against the rising danger of repeated carnage and war. It is like a great disease of the world, that festers continually and again and again breaks out like an erupting boil. The one thing that Christians can do is to continue to preach the love of God in Jesus, to take the place of the hatred that fills and envenoms the human heart.

The world is sick in its morals. In the higher altitudes of crime there is a flood of embezzlement, cheating in financial transactions involving millions of dollars, diversion of public moneys into private pockets, and a veritable Augean stable of reeking dishonesty; and in the lower levels of the common man there is a deplorable obliteration of the sharp line of distinction that separates the property of one from that of another. Dishonesty that is grand and dishonesty that is petty are the order of the day. Most people

have become cheaters. An absolute down-to-the-penny honesty has been called impossible for our day. The world is sick in its financial affairs. Is there any cure? Frantically the writers are pointing to the sickness and few know the remedy. But here, too, the Great Physician has the remedy that will cure, if it is applied to the life of the individual and the life of the nation. The Great Physician who went into the house of the publican Zacchaeus and heard him say that he would disgorge his ill-gotten gains and lead a life of honesty, can be taken into the banks and business houses, into government offices and stores, and He can there exert an influence through His Word that will change the life of a Levi to the life of a Matthew.

The atmosphere which we are breathing is becoming putrid. There is a record of criminality that makes one think of the days of Noe. Last year a crime occurred in Chicago every twelve and a half minutes. Thieves stole \$45,000 a day, the year's total loss by thievery being over sixteen million dollars. And that is Chicago alone. The divorce evil is not abating. The sale of obscene literature kept under the counters or displayed openly to the gaping view of adults and teen-agers is not in retrogression; the flagrant orgies of in chastity that frequently come to light in schools break out again and again; sex crimes scream from the large print of newspapers; these and many, many other symptoms of a destroying spiritual carcinoma are evident to anyone who takes the trouble to count the pulse beat of humanity through observation and study.

Rome calls out loudly and with more insistence and persuasion than ever: The cure for the world's ills lies in a return to the one and only holy religion, that of Rome; despite that fact the greatest malefactors of our day bear names that stamp them clearly as coming from places in the world where Rome has full sway over the lives of the people.

New movements spring up again and again. Today it is the Christophers, whose alleged transformations of human lives and of the world's condition is currently described in the magazine modeled after the *Reader's Digest* and called the *Catholic Digest*. The article has the intriguing title "You Can Still Change the World," and it is the Christopher movement that you must embrace for the metamorphosis.

Physicians and remedies for the world's sickness without end — and yet, there is but One who will help. It is Jesus, the Great Physician. Let it be our purpose to bring the Great Physician into the sickroom of the world. The Gospel of Jesus is the one force that can better the world. A look in faith at Calvary will fill the heart with new resolve for better living, with new spiritual life, with new mental health, with a new purpose in life, and with a new step into the direction of God and of heaven.

St. Charles, Mo.