



God has placed each part in the body just as he wanted it to be.

— 1 Corinthians 12:18 (NirV)



Adult Bible Study: Part 1

Opening Discussion

How many people here know someone with a disability?

How does your friend or family member cope in his/her community?

Are there things that your friend or family member may need help with when it comes to completing certain tasks?

Do you have a disability? Would you be willing to share with the group?

How do others treat your friend, family member or you?

Introduction

We have just discovered a wide range of both abilities and disabilities. Through this opening discussion, we see that the term “disability” is not very precise, especially if we are defining an intellectual or developmental disability. If we continued our analysis, we would learn that this label is applied, not only to people whose disabilities are obvious, but also to individuals who have operated in what we would call the “social norm” for most of their adult lives.

“I prefer to be called Joseph, not the man in the wheelchair.”
—Joseph

We have also discovered that saying a person has “a disability” is largely useless as a descriptive term and usually tells us little about **who the person really is**. While these various labels and terms are helpful in the fields of medicine and social services, they have little use in most everyday life situations.

Because these labels follow the individual throughout her life, they serve to accentuate her differences and push us into “dealing” with her by providing “special” services and attention. These efforts are well intentioned but often counterproductive. They run the risk of increasing her isolation and adding to feelings of inadequacy.

“I know I need extra help in math, but I wish they wouldn’t call the class special!”
—Matthew

“If I go to heaven and there is no Down syndrome, who will I be?”
—Gineen

1. How can labels help? How can they hurt?

When someone does not fit the social norm, our efforts are to force normalcy on them. Words such as “mainstreaming” and “integration” often disguise society’s attempt to change the very essence of who a person is to fit its view of normal. There is little consideration of how the person with disabilities sees herself.

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We do not understand that having a disability is “normal” for her; we do not allow her to embrace her disability as being a part of who she is. We only ask her to change.

2. Think about your friend with disabilities. Do they want to change? Should they change?

3. Would they still be who they are if they changed? Why or why not?

Our purpose in this study is not to criticize the social services industry; it is to determine the Church's responsibility in supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Is proclaiming the Word and administering the Sacraments enough? What adjustments need to be made, what efforts initiated? How do our attitudes have to change so that we may effectively minister WITH them vs. TO them, and what does the Bible really have to say about disabilities?

“Maybe the issue in heaven is not that I will hear, but that you will understand my language.”

—Alex

Asking questions of this nature is an essential step in engaging the Body of Christ in our mission to all people, not only those with disabilities. We are all “created in Jesus Christ to do good works;” we are all **Meant to Be**.

Disability and the Bible

There are many mentions of persons with disabilities in the Bible. In order to gain a biblical perspective, we will have to look at several passages in their cultural and historical context. In addition, let's consider the spiritual implications of each example. We are certainly aware of the limitations of medical knowledge in ancient times. We may be further hampered by the fact that the Hebrew culture of the Bible was not as advanced in the healing arts as were other ancients. The Egyptians, Babylonians, and the Greeks each were considerably more “scientific” in their approach to the treatment of injuries and disease.

“My teacher always says that this (points to the left) is my good leg and this (points to the right) is my bad leg. I wonder why she says that. As far as I know, legs can't do anything wrong.”

—Patrick

Both the Old Testament and Hebrew culture reflect a holistic, or entire person, approach to health and healing that seems foreign to our modern thinking. The physical and the spiritual were intertwined, and the emphasis was on prevention more than treatment. Disease and disability were considered the result of sin. They were therefore directly connected to the sin of the affected individual and healing was associated with God.

Read the following passages together. **Exodus 15:26**, **2 Samuel 12:13–19**, and **Psalms 38:1–8**.

4. What do these passages tell you about the attitudes toward health and healing among the Hebrew people?

Essentially, in the Hebrew worldview, all difficulties faced in life were caused by the presence of sin in the world. Healing is strongly connected with the coming of the Messiah, as is the presence of general well-being.

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Read **Psalm 103: 1–5**, **Malachi 4:2**, and **Isaiah 1:1–9**.

5. What do these passages tell us about what was anticipated with the coming of the Messiah?

Miraculous healings were fairly uncommon in the Old Testament. Read these accounts **1 Kings 17:17–24** and **2 Kings 5:1–14**.

6. What New Testament events are brought to mind?

How do these actions, such as cleansing and the raising of the dead, foreshadow what would happen when Jesus came?

So far we have dealt with disability and disease in the broadest of senses. Today we recognize that there is a difference between the two terms. Not all diseases result in a disability and not all disabilities are caused by diseases. We know that what we call “disabilities” can be the result of differences in the individual’s genetic code as well as external causes. We also know that a person with a physical or intellectual disability may be completely healthy in all other ways. We have considered what the biblical attitude toward disease and disability, now let us look at its attitude toward the individual.

“People always ask me how I got this way. I just tell them that I was born this way. It is who I am.”
—Justin

Read **Leviticus 21:16–24**.

7. What does this seem to say about God’s attitude toward any disability?

In order to enter the Old Testament priesthood you had to be a male from the tribe of Levi, the smallest tribe of the people of Israel, numbering only 23,000 males older than 1 month old out of a total male population of over 600,000.

8. How does this additional information affect the interpretation of the Leviticus 21 passage?

See Numbers 26:57–62

An important part of the study of Scripture is keeping passages in the correct context.

9. What other factors influence how we understand this passage?

The work of the priest was often strenuous and grueling, a fact that can easily be missed with our modern experience and impression of the pastoral office. The Hebrew priest was responsible for performing the ritual sacrifices and burnt offerings using animals ranging from turtledoves (easy) to bulls (not so easy). The priest would kill the animal, drain its blood and sprinkle it on the altar for a burnt offering. The priest would then quarter the animal, offering each of the parts on the altar until they were entirely consumed by the fire. They tended the fire, making certain that it did not go out, or that the ash did not build up. As the sacrificial system changed, the custom was to offer a sacrificial lamb each day, morning and evening to foretell Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. No wonder priests were forced to retire at the age of 50!

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10. How does knowing about the duties of a priest change your interpretation of the Leviticus 21 passage?

The limitations imposed on the priesthood are obviously not intended to portray anything regarding God's attitude towards persons with disabilities. The Old Testament sacrificial system pointed toward the perfect sacrifice that would be offered by the wholly innocent Son of God, Jesus Christ. All involved, from the animal "without blemish" to the priest had to reflect, or demonstrate, at least on the surface, the perfection of Jesus who would offer his blood as the atonement for all the sins of humanity.

Next session, we will continue with our study of what the Bible says about disabilities. We will concentrate especially on the work that Jesus did during his earthly ministry and touch base with the Apostle Paul and the early Christian Church.