

Foreword by Matt Chandler

PRACTICING THE POWER



WELCOMING THE GIFTS
OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN YOUR LIFE

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CHAPTER 5

PRACTICING THE POWER OF HEALING

One of the more important ways to encourage the practice of the miraculous gifts in your life and in the church is by cultivating a culture of prayer. In this chapter, we'll take a closer look at the relationship between prayer and healing, and I'll share some practical advice on how you might pray for healing with an individual. First, let's return to the question of faith. What role does our faith or the faith of the person we are praying for have as we pray for healing?

There are a number of ways in which faith is manifest in our prayers for healing. On occasion the faith of the person needing healing is instrumental (Matthew 9:22), while at other times it is the faith of a friend or family member (Matthew 15:28; Mark 2:5, 11). Sometimes the focus is on the faith of the person praying for the one who needs healing (Mark 9:17–24). At other times, faith apparently plays no part at all in the healing (John 5:1–9). Indeed, in the gospel of John, faith is *never* mentioned as a condition for healing (see also Matthew 8:14–

15). The point is that on some occasions, God simply heals by a sovereign act of his will unrelated to anything in us. However, in the vast majority of cases, Jesus healed people because of *someone's* faith.

In the case of both Jairus and the woman with the discharge of blood (Mark 5:21–29), faith is directed toward Jesus as an expression of need. In Luke 17:11–19 Jesus healed ten lepers, and when one returned to say “thanks,” Jesus said: “Your *faith* has made you well” (v. 19). When Bartimaeus asked Jesus to heal him of his blindness, Jesus said: “Go, your faith has healed you” (Mark 10:46–52). And in Mark 2 and the famous story of the paralytic being lowered through the roof, Jesus healed when he saw that the man’s friends had faith (vv. 5, 11).

The Variety of Ways of Faith in God

Faith is never monolithic. As I shared earlier in differentiating between converting, continuing, and charismatic faith, there are different expressions and degrees of faith depending on the object of our trust or the focus of our belief. All of us have faith that God is our sole source for blessing, that he is our hope for eternal life and the fulfillment of all the promises we read in Scripture (see Psalms 33:18–22; 147:10–11).

Why was faith so important to Jesus? The simple answer is that faith magnifies the mercy and power of God. By its very nature, faith leads us to look away from ourselves and any notion of self-reliance and confidently trust God for every

provision. Faith is a confession of our personal inability and of God's limitless power. When we relate to God with genuine faith, the focus is not on the person who believes but on God to whom we look and in whose promises and power we place our confident trust. Faith is an act of self-denial, a renunciation of one's ability to do anything. Faith itself carries no power; but it is instrumental, deriving its significance from the role it plays in relating us to the God who answers our prayers.

In the gospels we see that faith in Christ's ability to heal often affects the outcome. Jesus took special delight in healing those who trusted in his power, people who were open and receptive to his ability to perform a mighty work.

In Matthew 9:28–29 Jesus asks the two blind men one question—"Do you believe I am *able* to heal you?" Jesus wants to draw out what they think about him, whether or not they trusted him and his ability to heal.

"Yes, Lord," came their response.

"According to your faith be it done to you," said Jesus, and they were instantly healed. Jesus regarded their confidence in his power to help them as "faith" and dealt mercifully with them on that basis.

Although you and I may think that our confidence in divine omnipotence is too obvious to play a role in whether or not someone is healed, Jesus treats it as something of critical importance. The leper in Matthew 8 said to Jesus, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean" (v. 2). The leper had no reservations when it came to Christ's ability. But he was reluctant to presume upon Christ's will. Notice that Jesus doesn't

rebuke him for his doubts, as if it were a shortcoming in his faith that might jeopardize his healing. He healed him because of his confidence that he *could* do it. When I pray for people to be healed, I typically ask them to confess out loud their belief that God is able to heal them. I suggest you do the same.

Yet another expression of faith is our confidence in God's character, specifically, his disposition or heart for healing. This relates primarily to our trust in God's goodness and his commitment to build up and to restore. God is overflowing in compassion, and healing is a window into his heart for the welfare and blessing of his people (see Luke 11:11–13). It's also important that we have faith that God actually does heal in our day and time. To say "God, I don't know if this is something you still do today, but just in case it is, I'm going to ask you to heal me" is not an expression of the sort of faith that God delights to honor with the impartation of his power. If you are a cessationist of some degree or if you question the presence of the miraculous in the present church age, it is unlikely you will pray with much expectancy or anticipation of God saying yes to your request.

Prayer and Confession of Sin

Another aspect of healing prayer we need to briefly consider is the relationship between healing and the confession of sin. There is an important word for us on this subject in James 5:16. James writes: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a right-

eous person has great power as it is working.” James likely has in mind sins of bitterness, resentment, jealousy, anger, or unforgiveness in our relationships with one another, though he may be thinking of other sins we have committed against God. He probably has in mind the act of confessing to the person against whom you have sinned or confessing to another believer your more general transgressions or violations of biblical laws. What this tells us is that *God has chosen to suspend healing mercy, making it dependent on the repentance of his people*. If the hurting doesn’t get healed, that doesn’t mean that God doesn’t heal today. The presence of sin and the lack of repentance may also be a factor. The stubbornness and spiritual insensitivity of people can affect God’s willingness to heal.

We should also take careful note of the example of Elijah to which James appeals in verses 17–18. The argument has been made by some that biblical miracles were clustered or concentrated in only three major periods of history: the days of Moses and Joshua, the time of Elijah and Elisha, and the time of Christ and the apostles. The point of this argument is that Elijah and Elisha, for example, were special, extraordinary, unique individuals who cannot serve as models for us when we pray.

But here James says precisely the opposite! The point of James 5:17–18 is to counter the argument that Elijah was somehow unique or that because of the period in which he lived he could pray with miraculous success but we cannot. James wants us to know that *Elijah was just like you and me*. He was a human being with weaknesses, fears, doubts, and

failures, just as we are. In other words, James is saying: “Don’t let anyone tell you Elijah was in a class by himself. He wasn’t. He’s just like you. You are just like him. Therefore, pray like he did!” And we must not forget the context: *James appeals to the example of Elijah to encourage us when we pray for the sick!* The point is that we should pray for miraculous healing with the same faith and expectation with which Elijah prayed for the end of a three-year drought.

Faith and Gifts of Healing

One of the more common obstacles that blocks people from praying for the sick is their misguided belief about what has sometimes been called “the spiritual gift of healing.” The only place where a “gift” of healing is explicitly mentioned is in 1 Corinthians 12:9 and 28. In our English translations both of the words “gift” and “healing” are plural and lack the definite article, hence the translation: “*gifts of healings*.” Why is this significant? It suggests that Paul did not envision a person being endowed with one healing gift that is operative at all times for all diseases. His language suggests many different gifts or powers of healing, each appropriate to and effective for its related illness, or it may suggest that each occurrence of healing constitutes a distinct gift in its own right. I’ve had the opportunity on numerous occasions to meet people who have what appears to be a healing anointing for one particular affliction. Some are able to pray more effectively for those with back problems while others see more success when praying for

migraine headaches. This may also be what Paul had in mind when he spoke of “gifts” of “healings.”

So don’t accept the erroneous idea that if anyone could *ever* heal, he could *always* heal. In view of the lingering illness of Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25–30), Timothy (1 Timothy 5:23), Trophimus (2 Timothy 4:20), and perhaps Paul himself (2 Corinthians 12:7–10; Galatians 4:13), it is better to view this gift as subject to the will of God, not the will of people. A person may be gifted to heal many people, but not all. Another may be gifted to heal only one person at one particular time of one particular disease.

I raise this because I’ve been in situations where a person has been asked to pray for the sick and they’ve said: “I can’t. I don’t have the gift of healing.” If my reading of Paul is correct, there is no such thing as *the* gift of healing, if by that one means the God-given ability to heal everyone of every disease on every occasion. Rather, the Spirit sovereignly distributes a *charisma* of healing for a particular occasion, even though previous prayers for physical restoration under similar circumstances may not have been answered, and even though subsequent prayers for the same affliction may not be answered. In other words, “gifts of healings” are occasional and subject to the sovereign purposes of God.

Few doubt that Paul had a “gift” for healing. But his prayers for Epaphroditus weren’t answered, at least not at first (see Philippians 2:25–30). Clearly, Paul could not heal at will. And aside from Jesus, no one else could either! Even Jesus had limitations from the Father on how and when he could heal (read

John 5:19; Mark 6:5–6). Some might conclude from Paul's failure to heal his friend that "the gift of healing" was "dying out" at this juncture in the life of the church (in spite of the fact that late in his ministry in Acts 28:9, Paul apparently healed everyone on the island of Malta who came to him). But I think it better to conclude that healing, whenever and wherever it occurred, was subject not to the will of man but to the will of God. No one, not even Paul, could always heal all diseases. If Paul was distressed that Epaphroditus was ill, almost unto death, and that initially his prayers for him were ineffective, I doubt seriously if the apostle would have drawn the same conclusions that modern cessationists do. Paul understood the occasional nature of gifts of healings.

The fact that healing is an expression of divine mercy (Philippians 2:27) means that it should never be viewed as a right. Healing is not the payment of a debt. God does not *owe* us healing. We don't deserve healing. I believe we should have faith for healing, but there is a vast difference between faith in divine mercy and presumption based on an alleged right.

The word "mercy" is the same one used in the gospels to describe why Jesus healed people while he was on the earth. God's motive for healing hasn't changed! The primary reason God healed through Jesus prior to Pentecost was because he is a merciful, compassionate God. And the primary reason God continues to heal after Pentecost is because he is a merciful, compassionate God. God is no less merciful, no less compassionate, no less caring when it comes to the physical condition of his people after Pentecost than he was before Pentecost.

The Practice of Healing Prayer¹

We now turn to the actual practice of healing prayer. What I suggest here is fairly simple, perhaps so much so that you may wonder if something else, something more mysterious, is called for. I don't believe so.

The first step in healing prayer is the *interview*. When someone comes to you for prayer, don't be quick to speak. Listen. Ask questions. Ask the person: "Where does it hurt? How long have you struggled with this affliction? What did the doctor say? How can I help? Is your problem primarily physical or emotional or spiritual? Are you under attack from Satan?" Gaining clear answers to these questions will help you when it comes time to pray.

But the person for whom you are praying isn't the only one you should ask. Ask the Holy Spirit as well. And ask the person in need of healing to ask the Spirit, too. Don't be in a hurry. Give yourself time to listen. Be especially careful how you use whatever prompting or insights you believe the Spirit has given. As we'll see later when dealing with the prophetic, avoid such highly charged language as, "Well, God told me just now to tell you . . ."

The second step in this process is what I call the *diagnosis*. The focus is to determine, if possible, what is the cause or source of the condition. Often, the causes could be a combination of several factors. Merely living in a fallen world in which we are regularly exposed to viruses, bacteria, as well as accidents of a variety of sorts could be responsible. There is

also the ever-present reality of personal sin (cf. James 5 and John 9). But be careful in pinpointing sin as the sole cause or overemphasizing it. You don't want to compound their problem with accusations that might put unwarranted guilt on their hearts. In James 5:15 the brother of our Lord says, regarding the person for whom prayer is offered, "and *if* he has committed sins," sins most likely that are responsible for his affliction, he will be forgiven. James doesn't presume to know if this is the cause, but it may be.

On occasion the problem will be emotional, deriving from the stress and pressures of daily life. Anxiety and unforgiveness may combine to contribute to physical weakness and other diseases. The cause of the sickness may be traced to their family history, which is to say that genetic factors may have contributed to the affliction. Then there are dysfunctional habits and relational sins to which they were exposed during the course of their upbringing.

Sometimes the cause of the affliction may be demonic. Jesus ministered to a woman who for eighteen years was afflicted by a "disabling spirit." "She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself" (Luke 13:11). When the Pharisees objected to his healing her on the Sabbath, he rebuked them with a question: "Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 13:16).

Of course, there will be numerous instances when we simply don't know the cause of the affliction. We must be careful about drawing direct cause and effect conclusions about why

a particular person suffers from a particular disease. There's no benefit to be gained in trying to be smarter than the Holy Spirit! And there's no reason to think that God would be disinclined to heal someone simply because we are ignorant of the cause or source of the disease.

There is one other situation that I want to bring to your attention. I was once asked by an extremely overweight lady to pray for pain in both her lower back and knees. When I asked if she had visited a doctor, she said yes. "He told me that it was almost certain that my excessive weight was the precipitating cause of both the pain in my back and in my knees." When I asked her about her struggle with weight, she confessed that it was due to gluttony. There didn't appear to be any other physiological or bio-chemical factors that made weight gain unavoidable.

So what ought one to do in a case like this? I certainly did not want to intensify her feelings of guilt, but the clear fact was that her lack of self-control had contributed directly to her physical discomfort. Should we pray for God to heal a physical affliction that is likely the immediate effect of a willful pattern of sinful choices? What about the person with emphysema who cannot quit a smoking habit? There is no easy answer to this conundrum. My best counsel is that one should begin with an attempt to get at the underlying root of sin or addiction in a person's life, followed by a call to repentance and encouragement to make certain alterations in one's habits of life and choices. My initial prayer for this woman was for the strength of the Holy Spirit to enable her to make substantive changes in

her eating habits. Following this, I proceeded to pray for relief from the pain in both her back and her knees.

After the interview and the diagnosis, it's time to *pray*, the third step. Your prayer may take one of several different forms. The most common prayer is petition directed toward God: "Heavenly Father, in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ, we ask that you heal your child of this affliction." I would also recommend that you be as specific as possible. Name the affliction. Ask the Holy Spirit to impart his healing power directly into or on that portion of the person's body.

There is not only prayer to God but also prayer *from* God as well. What I have in mind is the confident, Spirit-empowered command of faith in which you are led to declare: "In the name of Jesus, be healed!" Notice that I did not say, and neither should you, "In the name of Jesus, I declare that you *are* healed." If it has been determined, so far as one is able, that the cause of the affliction is demonic, one is fully justified in issuing the command: "In the name of Jesus, I command every demonic spirit to leave this child of God. Be gone and never return!" (See Luke 10:17–20). In all this, avoid thinking that God will not heal unless you say it just right or with perfect grammar or in a theologically sophisticated way. God is primarily concerned with the attitude of your heart and your compassion for the hurting and your dependence on him, not the style or sophistication with which you pray.

There are also some specific, concrete practices that I suggest you employ. For example, if possible, ask the person to close her eyes, but keep yours open. There may be physio-

logical responses that you need to observe that will inform and guide the way you continue to pray (trembling, deep breathing, weeping, etc.). Don't rush. Spend time with them. Linger long in prayer. Be patient. If you sense or see God doing something, bless it! Be aware of possible (though not necessary) physical manifestations, as people will often report things such as tingling, spasms, warmth in the area where the affliction is located, perhaps even the alleviation of pain, which often comes gradually, in stages, rather than instantaneously. You may observe ever-so-slight trembling or deep breathing. On occasion the person will begin to weep.

When such phenomena begin to occur, it proves helpful to ask questions of the person for whom you are praying, such as: "How do you feel?" "Do you sense God is doing something?" "Are you experiencing an increase in your faith, or are you struggling with doubt or fear?" Depending on their answer, adjust your prayers appropriately. Don't be frustrated if they aren't feeling anything.

Finally, an important element is the laying on of hands. If a man is praying for a woman, or vice versa (it is always good if more than one is present if this is the case), never touch them between the knees and the neck (unless they suffer from back pain and they consent to have you place your hand there). Always ask them first before you lay hands on them ("Is it ok with you?"). I would also recommend that you consider anointing them with oil.

One of the reasons people in the church today disregard healing is because they disregard the body. They believe that

to focus on the health and wellbeing of the body (at least to the degree that you would regularly pray for its healing) is misguided. Our attention is to be more “spiritual” as we focus on the condition of our souls. This is little more than a modern version of the ancient heresy of *gnosticism*.

The biblical view of the body, on the other hand, is quite positive. God created us as physical beings. We are both material and immaterial (see Genesis 2:7). The importance of the body is extensively illustrated in 1 Corinthians chapter 6. Our *bodies* were redeemed by the blood of Christ, no less than our souls (v. 20). Our *bodies* are the temples of the Holy Spirit (v. 19). Our *bodies* are designed “for the Lord” (v. 13). Our *bodies* are members of Christ himself (v. 15). Our *bodies* are capable of being sinned against (v. 18). Our *bodies* are to be used to honor God (v. 20). Finally, our bodies will be resurrected and glorified. In other words, we will spend eternity as *physically* glorified beings (see Romans 8:11, 23; 1 Corinthians 15:35–49). At the judgment seat of Christ, we will have to give an account for what we have done *in our bodies*.

There is no escaping the fact that *spirituality is physical*. Although God is spirit, he created the physical, material world and pronounced it *good* (Genesis 1:4, 12, 18, 21, 25). When God created us in his image, he gave us bodies.

On several occasions Jesus healed people with the spoken word alone. But in most instances he did so by laying his hands on them or making physical contact.² Perhaps the most amazing text of all is Luke 4:40, where it is said that Jesus laid hands on “every one” of those in a vast multitude who had

come to him for aid. It must have been physically exhausting and time intensive for him to do so, but Jesus took the opportunity to lay his hands on every person who came to him for prayer.

You may conclude with what we might call *post-prayer directions*. Emphasize that healing is a process. If nothing happens instantaneously, the person may feel discouraged. They may blame themselves. So encourage them with the fact that God often moves slowly to test our faith and to call us to persevere in prayer. If you are wondering if there is ever a point at which you should cease praying for someone to be healed, I can only respond with the words of my friend Jack Taylor: “Never stop praying unless shown otherwise by divine revelation or death!” We all know what he meant by the word “death.” As for divine revelation, he was reminding us of Paul’s experience in 2 Corinthians 12. After what were most likely three extended seasons of intercession, the Lord finally told Paul as definitively as possible: “No. I’m not going to remove your thorn in the flesh. My grace is sufficient for you.” Short of that sort of unmistakable instruction or the death of the one for whom you are praying, never stop praying!

Never suggest the problem or the reason they were not healed is their lack of faith. It *may* be that, but it is not for you to say. It could just as easily be *your* lack of faith that accounts for why nothing has happened. Or, as we’ve seen, it may not be related to anyone’s faith at all.

Let the individual talk about how they feel. Ask them if they are encouraged, discouraged, filled with doubt or with faith.

Do they feel the love of God or a sense of condemnation and failure? Address their response in a loving and biblical way, and then pray yet again for their healing! It may be necessary for you to direct them to follow through on any necessary confession of sin or reconciliation with someone else. As noted earlier, lingering unforgiveness and deep bitterness or resentment toward another can contribute to physiological ailments. Encourage them to come again and seek prayer from you (or others) as often as they wish. Make sure they know that they can come to you more than once. Asking for prayer again (and again and again) is not a sign of a lack of faith. Neither is it nagging God! Regardless of the outcome, don't ever think you have failed! The degree of healing or relief is not the measure of success: obedience is.

1 A shorter, somewhat abbreviated version of what follows first appeared in my book *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Gifts*, 205–210.

2 See Matthew 8:15; 9:18–25, 27–31; 14:36; 17:7; 19:13–15; Mark 1:40–42; 5:21–24; 6:1–6, 56; 7:31–35; 8:22–25; 9:27; 16:18; Luke 13:10–13; 22:51; 24:50. Also note the practice of the early church in Acts 3:7; 5:12; 6:6; 8:17–19; 9:10–17, 41; 11:30; 13:1–3; 14:3; 19:11; 28:7–8. This emphasis is also found in 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22; 2 Timothy 1:6 (cf. Numbers 27:15–23; Deuteronomy 34:9).