**The Religious Necessity of Visiting the Sick**

(Jay Horsley)

The sick, like the poor, are ever with us. This provides for us almost unlimited opportunities to put our Christian religion into practice. Every week this format and the announcements of the [brethren] inform us as to who is in need of help and prayers. How do we respond to it? Do we ever offer prayer? Do we ever go see these brethren? If we do not – we must begin. If we do – we must continue. Consider these biblical reasons why.

***The Golden Rule***: The lofty goal of Christian behavior is “*all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them*” (Matthew 7:12). What would be our desire if sick? We would all hope that when we are aged or grossly infirmed that one would come and care tenderly for us. Yet if we do not now lay up the treasure of doing this good work for others in the time of our health how can we rightfully call for such care for ourselves later? Is it not the very definition of selfishness to expect others to do for you what you refuse to do for them? Instead, we must “*not merely look out for our own personal interests, but also for the interests of others*” (Philippians 2:4). This is the very law of Christ, “*Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ*” (Galatians 6:2).

***A Sign of Familiar Love***: Many of those that are sick among us in this congregation also have family here. In fact, there are very few sick anywhere who do not have relatives. If all relatives did their divinely ordained duties society and the church would be much less burdened. However among this congregation are many sterling examples of this love put into practice: spouses caring for the ones to whom they pledged to be faithful “in sickness and in health”; parents caring for children for whom they must provide, children “making a return” (1 Timothy 5:4) unto their parents, and grandchildren and grandparents showing an active love and concern that spans the generations. In fact this rightful love in action is an example to us, for as the Scriptures point out, it is only those most dilatory in their faith who are neglectful of this. “*But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever*” (1 Timothy 5:8). This is, as the pagans were, “without natural affection, unloving” (Romans 1:31).

***An Exercise in Humility***: One excuse often given by those who refuse to do their duty is how uncomfortable it makes them feel. To be in the presence of the seriously ill, those of greatly advanced age or serious medical condition is not pleasant. It is disconcerting to see bodies so weakened and distorted by time and disease. These bodies are not the way we wish them to be and they are graphic reminders of the approaching death that awaits every man. We naturally don’t like to think about death – and disease is an extension of it. To face the one who is sick we must face within ourselves the real possibility that such conditions are to be our fate as well. Our response to this can be to become morose or to be thankful for the health that we do have.

***A New Appreciation For Health***: One of the greatest ways that we can be reminded of the blessings that we have is to deal with those who don’t have them. Some things become much more obvious by their absence. If we have lived with something a long time we tend to take it for granted. A visit to the home of the poor helps us appreciate our wealth. A visit to the bed of the sick makes us appreciate our health. Who would not be moved to thanking God for their good health after spending time with those who lack it and so desperately want it?

***A New Appreciation For Prayer***: Many who are healthy and well supplied do not pray as they ought for they do not see the need. A visit to the sick – for who grave danger of life is present or soon expected, or for whom medical science can offer no hope, or for whom pain and suffering attend their every movement and activity – helps us see that prayer is the only response possible. Prayer – for their spiritual security and encouragement as the physical fails. Prayer – for their physical comfort and relief. Prayer – for those who patiently and lovingly care for them that they might be blessed in and for their efforts and have the strength to continue. In all things – prayer. Also, having so closely prayed with them in suffering we are more likely to continue in prayers for them when absent. But if always absent where is the reminder of the need of prayer?

***A Sign of True Faith***: Many are Christians by loud profession having once made the good confession, but their obsession with self and their own interests is obvious when they continually absent themselves from sick beds and benevolent opportunities. It is not my decision that such faith is vain, it is the proclamation of the divine writer: “*This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world*” (James 1:27). It is not true religion if it continually shirks duty.

***The Duty of Elders, Preachers, and All Christians to Visit***: Some see this duty as one primarily, or even only, for the leaders of the church. Let the elders (they are the ones appointed after all) and the preacher (he is on the payroll) or others go. By this same logic only the elders and preacher should pray, teach, sing or encourage (after all: they are appointed, he is paid). Do elders have a duty to visit the sick? Yes, the Scripture says that the sick should call for them to pray with them (James 5:13). Also they should go under the general heading of caring for the flock (1 Peter 5:20). The preacher has no specific instruction to go “as the preacher” to the sick (if so, where is the passage?), only the general instruction to “strengthen and encourage” (2 Thessalonians 3:2). Every passage (save James 5:13) that deals directly or by implication with visiting the sick is addressed equally to ALL Christians.

The importance of this duty to every Christian cannot be overstated – for eternal salvation hangs in the balance. Jesus speaks of the separation of the goats and sheep to the left hand and to the right in Matthew 25:37-46. “*Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You? And the King will answer and say to them, Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me … Then He will answer them, saying, Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life*.” Which side of the divide do your actions put you on?