

© Protected by Common Law Copyright.
This may be copied for personal use only.

Age and Eldercare

by William P. Wilson, M.D.

-- *Commentaries from past newsletters – Spring 2002*

“Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Heb. 9:27,28 NIV).

As I approach my 80th birthday I find that I am losing more and more of my friends and colleagues. Just recently one of the first students I trained to be a Christian psychiatrist died at age 54. David Larson, M. D. had carried out research on religion and health for a number of years and had encouraged research in the area. He was internationally known for his work. A week later a prominent pastor in the town where I work died at age 60. Then the wife of one of my colleagues at Duke died only to be followed 5 days later by her husband. My daughter told me yesterday that the child of one of her friends in Boston MA where she lives died at age 16 of leukemia. This morning my neighbor, a pastor, was all dressed up in a black suit. When I asked him where he was going he told me he was going to preach the funeral of a baby who had died at age 16 months. On Friday I went to pray with two of my friends. When I got there one of them was obviously quite sick. He was suffering from cardiac asthma. He has been handicapped over the last few months with a variety of problems. We prayed for him and a short time later his asthma suddenly began to abate and we finished our prayer time. Even so, when we finished praying, I thought, “the three of us certainly are on the downhill side of life.” This morning I left for work and just as I got on the freeway I saw a wreck. A little red car was torn in half and another car was just a hunk of twisted metal. A third car was lying on its side with the front torn off it. My thought was, “Could anyone have lived through that destructive an accident?” It turned out that all of them did, but it was a miracle. I drive that road three times a week and there are as many drunks out there each day to cause accidents, as there was that morning. Deaths, trauma and illness remind us of our mortality.

This last semester I taught a course at the seminary on aging and elder care. It was a course that really made me think a lot about myself. Here I was, an old man, teaching on a subject that really applied to the lives of me, my wife and many of my friends. It too made me think.

I, like most people, have always lived as if I would live forever. I knew I wouldn't, but I never gave much thought to dying. When I was starting my research career I did some very original research on Alzheimer's disease and strokes, but I never

thought that I might someday suffer from these problems. It seems that we humans think we are invincible. I have to say that even though my father died at age 89 of a brain tumor, and my mother at 96 of multiple small strokes, I have never thought that I could possibly suffer the same problems.

Seven years ago I had open-heart surgery for aortic stenosis and insufficiency. I have since that time had numerous angioplasties during which stents were put in my coronary arteries. Even with all that, the end of my days seemed remote.

As I look at all the deaths that have occurred around me in the last few weeks, I realize that the most important thing I can do is continue to do the Lord's work, and cultivate my spiritual life so that I will be what God wants me to be – holy. Why should I be holy? Jesus made it plain to us that we were to be perfect as our father in heaven is perfect (Matt. 5:48). Now holiness is moral perfection, and if we are morally perfect we are holy. But when we want to be holy we run into a roadblock. We are all sinners! Certainly we fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). We cannot stop sinning because we are told that we will continue to sin (Gal. 3:22). We often have moral paralysis in certain areas of our lives and we sin even though we know we don't want to. Paul was so right when he said, "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin" (Rom. 7:14-25).

Our sinful (human) nature is something that we are born with. It was corrupted in the fall and it can only be controlled by the power of the Holy Spirit. Even then the control is imperfect. This is why sin is as common in the church as it is outside. A pastor friend of mine once compared his church to Robinson Crusoe's goat pasture. You remember that Robinson Crusoe caught some wild goats and penned them. He tried to tame them but in the long run the goats in his pasture were as wild as the goats on the outside. This is the way the church is today. We need to become more holy. We need to be rescued from our slavery to sin.

In my effort to achieve perfection I am constantly running into my moral paralysis. My human nature, with Satan's temptations, draw me into sin. These are not rank

sins. They are venial sins. For those of you who do not know what venial sins are, I must point out that they are sins of a second order – minor if you will. The really bad ones are called carnal sins. They are such sins as adultery, murder, rape, robbery, assault with intent to kill, etc. This classification of sin is used by the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants have not tried to classify sins, although John Wesley said that sins of commission where the person sins although he knows he is wrong are worse than those that are committed out of ignorance. John Calvin on the other hand did not distinguish between major or minor sins. He thought that they were equally bad. Both of these reformers were, however, sure of the mercy of God and his faithfulness in forgiving sin.

Well now, if we are sinners and are going to continue to sin, what hope is there for us to be perfect as our father in heaven is perfect? Paul's statement at the end of the quotation from Romans cited above is the answer. Jesus is the answer. He paid our debt on the cross and provided forgiveness for all of our sins.

To illustrate how He will forgive to the uttermost, I cite the story of a man who was presented to me for an opinion by one of our residents. This man, a Viet Nam veteran, had come to the hospital for help in getting rid of the agony of his soul. He was called a post traumatic stress syndrome, but that was not his problem. His problem was sin! His story went something like this. He had been born and reared in an impoverished part of Appalachia. His father was an alcoholic and his aunt sold bootleg "likker." There were, however, two important things that happened that had an ameliorating effect on his life. Even though he came from a dysfunctional home, he somehow got saved at the age of 12 when he visited a little Baptist church in his community. The second ameliorating influence that happened was that he finished high school. He was the only member of his family to do so. In spite of his salvation experience he had begun to drink in high school. When he finished he went to work in the coalmines, but soon realized that this was a dead end. He had also married and had a couple of kids. After a few years he decided that his career was at a dead end so he enlisted in the army. He was sent to basic training where he continued to drink. In time he was sent to Korea where he drank more and more. He also took up with a Korean woman who soon got pregnant. During the seventh month of her pregnancy he was transferred to Viet Nam and assigned to the quartermaster section of a Special Forces unit (Green Berets). He drank even more and by now was using much marijuana.

He was issued a new rifle and to test it out he and a friend went to the rifle range to shoot a few rounds. He was high on alcohol and marijuana at the time. On the way back to his base he and the other man stopped to "plink" at a few targets along the road. After a few minutes they noticed an old man and woman walking down the road. His friend said, "Hey, there's a couple of targets." He shot two times and killed them both. They returned to base.

When he woke the next morning he realized what he had done and immediately became a psychiatric casualty. He was overwhelmed by fear and sorrow about what he had done. His symptoms were so severe that he was sent back as a psychiatric casualty to Okinawa and then to Honolulu and finally to San Francisco. This took about seven months and all the treatment that he received was useless. He did not improve. Finally he was discharged from the service and released to a veteran's hospital. They soon sent him back home.

He had seen enough of the world to know that he did not want to go back to Appalachia so he moved to our area and got a job as a baggage handler with an airline. He worked at this job for over six years, all the while drinking and smoking marijuana. In time he gave up alcohol because he was abusing his wife and children, and upped his daily use of marijuana. Finally, he came to the hospital for admission. He stayed two months, but left unchanged.

A year later he had ten days off and came and requested admission hoping that the staff had learned something that would relieve his symptoms. When he reached the ward and the resident completed his review of his old chart and did his examination, he threw up his hands in despair. He did not know how to treat the man's problem. He had been subjected to all of the treatments that were recommended for his problem and none had worked. He consulted his attending physician who also was at a loss to help him. They decided to present him to me the next day at their weekly ward conference in the hope that I would have a suggestion as to how to treat him. I had done research on PTSD and they felt that if anyone would have an idea I might.

At the conference they first related his story and the results of his examination to me. We then had him come into the conference room. When he came in I saw a short, bald headed, little man with a fringe of long red hair. His skin was ruddy and sunburned. I introduced myself and had him take a seat. I then reviewed what I knew about him and asked if it was true. He said, "Yes it is." I asked another few questions to get the chronology of his peregrinations correct in my mind.

I then said to him. "It seems to me that you must have some feelings about what you have done in your life. You have been an alcoholic, an adulterer, a deserter of your unborn child, and you murdered two people."

He looked at me and with obvious shame he said, " Doctor, every day for twelve years I have prayed that God would kill me to make me pay for what I have done."

"You could have committed suicide," I replied.

"Oh no," he said, "I deserve to be punished."

“But you can be forgiven,” I said.

“No I can’t,” he replied.

I did not want to get into a theological discussion with him before a group of non-believers so I dismissed him and lectured to the students on the existential despair of morality. I told them I did not know how to treat it, but that Viktor Frankl has said that we have to encounter someone or something to be healed. I did not know how to bring this about. We ended the conference on that note.

The Holy Spirit, however, told me that I did know someone he could encounter and be healed, so I told the resident that I had unfinished business with his patient and that I would like to see him again. The resident said I could only see him if he could come along. I told him he might not like to hear what I was going to say. He said he did want to hear it. I told him to come along then. We went into the resident’s office and asked the patient to come in with us.

After we closed the door, I said to him, “You said that you could not be forgiven for what you did. Why did you say that?”

“I’ve committed the unpardonable sin,” he said.

“Not unless you said that God made you do what you did.”

“God did not make me do it. I did it on my own.”

I paused for a few seconds and said, “Do you know that Jesus forgave his murderers as he hung on the cross, and that he will forgive you too – In Jesus’ name you are forgiven.”

As soon as I said this, big tears welled up into his eyes. They hung momentarily like big drops of dew on his lower lids, and then slowly began trickling down his cheeks. He looked at me and said, “Are you sure?”

I said, “The Bible says that ‘If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness.’ ”

With this he sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. We let him weep. After a while he asked. “Is there anything else I need to do?”

“Yes, you can rededicate your life to the Lord.”

With this he told the Lord with great passion that he wanted him to come back into his life and control it from that moment on. In my mind he was at that moment healed. He then came over to me, put his arms around me and wept and wept and wept. My white coat was wetted with his tears as he continued to

weep and said quietly, "Thank you, Lord, thank you, Dr. Wilson, thank you, thank you, thank you."

He stayed in the hospital for a few more days all the while telling everyone how he had been healed. He was followed up several months later and examination indicated that he really was healed. He no longer used drugs or alcohol, was being a loving husband and father and was working productively. Jesus' teachings had made him holy for that moment. I am sure he sinned again, but he knew where to find cleansing. Confession, repentance and forgiveness had done the cleansing.

This behavioral and spiritual triad are something that psychiatry cannot use. They can hear confession, but they do not believe in repentance, and they do not possess the power to forgive. Our patient had confessed. It was necessary that he confess his sins, but confession alone did not cure his despair. To continue the process of healing it was also important for him to repent. Again our patient was repentant. "For ten years I have prayed that God would kill me to make me pay for what I had done." He had a godly sorrow. He knew he deserved death as the wages of his sin, but he did not know that forgiveness was available to him.

Forgiveness is a spiritual intervention and no person can use it unless the Holy Spirit dwells in them. You see, forgiveness only comes from God. The Pharisees accused Jesus of blasphemy when he forgave a man's sins to heal him (Matt. 9:2,3, Mark 2:1-7), for they knew that only God can forgive. Even so, Jesus demonstrated his right to forgive sins when he healed a number of persons by forgiving their sins. The Pharisees had rightly stated that only God could forgive sins, but they did not recognize that Jesus was God and he had that power. The amazing thing about forgiveness is that **the power has been given to us**. If we are born again, the Holy Spirit dwells within us. Possessing the Holy Spirit gives us the power to forgive. In John 20:23, Jesus "breathed on his disciples and said, '**Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.**'" This was before the Holy Spirit was given to all believers. When Pentecost happened, we accessed the same power that Jesus gave to his disciples when he was with them.

It is important for me to emphasize that we are not doing the forgiving. It is only because we have been deputized by Jesus to pass on his forgiveness that we can forgive with God's forgiveness.

I do not know of any intervention that we possess in Christian psychiatry and counseling that is as powerful as forgiveness. Day after day people come into my office loaded with guilt and shame. They need forgiveness. They are quite willing to confess. They know they have sinned, and that they deserve punishment. They are repentant too, but their repentance many times is one that is energized by a worldly sorrow. Worldly sorrow leads to death. Godly sorrow on the other hand is a work of the Holy Spirit. When we have godly sorrow, we are remorseful

because we made Jesus suffer on the cross while he was taking our sins from us. David summed up our predicament in Psalm 51 when he said, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge." He knew that when we sin against someone we also sin against God.

Repentance is not something you hear about in the church today. In my years as a Christian I have only heard two sermons on the subject and I preached one of them. I feel so strongly about the neglect of the subject that I posted a paper on our website where I have discussed repentance in detail. In some of my other readings I also learned that people in the early church repented every day because they knew they sinned every day

Repentance is necessary before we come to the table to celebrate the Eucharist (communion). We have a prayer of confession in most of the liturgies for the Eucharist but these are not read with any kind of understanding of the significance they have for us to profit from the Eucharist. Paul said that a man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup (1 Cor. 11:28). When he examines himself he will know that he has sinned and can confess and repent and ask for and receive forgiveness. The Lord will then refill him with the Holy Spirit.

Why have I spent so much time on the subject of confession, repentance and forgiveness? The answer is that we need to continually clean ourselves up before we meet God face to face. As a child I used to see roadside signs that said, "Prepare to meet God!" No one could tell me how to prepare, and also I wasn't ready to meet Him. I did not really anticipate meeting Him for a long time. Therefore, I did not have to hurry so I dismissed the sign as the work of some overly religious nut. As I reflect on that admonition now I realize that we really do need to prepare to meet God face to face. The deaths that I related earlier make that point. All of us do. We start preparing by making Him Lord and Master of our life, but we have to maintain our spiritual state of cleanliness so that when we do meet Him face to face we will be holy.

Being spiritually clean is an ongoing task. Jesus told his disciples that his teaching had made them clean (John 15:3). It is clear though that they continued to need cleansing. So do we. To do this we have to obey His commandments. They are to love God with all our being, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to love one another, and to do love. Jesus told us that we had to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and prisoners and take strangers in our homes. These are His commandments and all of the law of God is summed up in them. Jesus said that if we loved Him we will obey his commands (John 15:10). For those of us who have a personal relationship with Him it is easy to obey them since He empowers us to do just that. You don't have to be old to realize the importance of being holy.