

Bethlehem College and Seminary
2020 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors + Church Leaders
Disability Ministry Seminar
February 3, 2020

Title: Gospel Hope for All Who Come: Your Church and Those Living with Disability

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Description: Your church members, all of them, were given to you by our sovereign God as a gift to proclaim his glory and to flourish under your pastoral leadership. Yet most churches struggle to serve and be served by those living with disabilities. In this seminar, we will discuss a biblical foundation for thinking about disability and practical help for how to welcome, embrace, disciple and prepare for service those God has called to live an atypical life in this present age.

Manuscript:

For the past quarter century I have lived with my oldest son who is blind, autistic, cognitively impaired and epileptic. In 2004 my wife was diagnosed with Stage IV breast cancer and we have lived with the complications of that disease ever since. On June 21, 2019 my youngest son was diagnosed with leukemia. This is a very personal issue for me. More importantly, it is a biblical issue as well.

Today I want to raise two significant questions related to more than two decades of my observing disability and the church. At the end we'll open it up for questions and observations:

1. God tells us in his book that he is sovereign over all things, all things are for his glory, and all things work together for your good, including disease and disability. Do you believe it?
2. Your church can't do everything on this issue of disability, but it can do something. Something meant for your church while also being good for the church universal. Will you do it?

First, a word about language. The language of disability is in constant change; please do not be offended or suspicious of me if I use a term you are not familiar with or if I do not use the most recent iteration of a disability term. I also do not use people-first language (that is, saying someone is a person with a disability rather than a disabled person) for two primary reasons. The communities I am most familiar with don't use it: the blind community is fine with using blind as an adjective, much like referring to a tall person or an athletic person or a smart person. Blind is merely descriptive and not pejorative. And increasingly adults I know in the autism community refer to themselves as autistic. My intention is not to offend anyone and I ask for grace. Please, continue to use your preferred language. Let us love each other on this issue and truly confound the world.

We are going to be all over the Bible. My manuscript with these references and my recommendations for pastors can be found at theworksofGod.com if you'd like to follow along on your phone..

I am anchoring this talk in Ephesians 2:10:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (ESV)

- The 'for' refers back to verses 8 and 9: For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.
 - We should take no credit for our salvation, nor should we want to.
- Workmanship and created refers to our being created beings
- Good works refer to the works we do in response to God's creative work; vs. 9 is clear that works do not save us.
- Beforehand refers to it being true from before the time of God's creative work in making the world. God designed and executed our being created and orchestrates his creation toward the good works he prepared for us to do.
- Note that God is orienting us to action - first his creative action based on his design and then our action in response with gratitude.

This idea of God's purposeful, creative, sovereign action is everywhere in his word:

- John 1:3: All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. (ESV)
- Psalm 139:13: For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. (ESV)

This includes perfect foreknowledge about what will happen to what God has formed:

- Psalm 139:16 Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. (ESV)
 - Note: both we, that is, people, are formed (v.13) and our days are formed (v. 16)
 - Like in Ephesians 2:10, these days were formed before they started.

This forming, creating, knitting, and making includes hard things or what we in our limited capacities to understand God's ways might call bad things:

- Isaiah 45:7 I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things. (ESV)

Given all this, God did not have to be specific about disability for us to know that he is sovereign over disability. But I'm glad he did:

- Exodus 4:11: Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" (ESV)
 - No embarrassment; a simple statement of fact that he creates as he pleases some who will live a life involving disability.

So, let us return to our first question. God tells us in his book that he is sovereign over all things, all things are for his glory, and all things work together for your good, including disease and disability. Do you believe it?

If you believe the bible, the answer must be yes, without equivocation. Back to Ephesians 2:10:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (ESV)

All of the elect are included here. The church has been slow to recognize that those living with one or more disabilities have gifts meant for the good of the church. Typically, people with disabilities in the church are thought of as recipients of good works from others. Yet I have met blind lawyers, blind leaders of college programs and blind directors of government projects. I know a deaf woman who runs a significant non-profit. Companies like Ford, Microsoft and SAP are now recruiting people with certain types of autism because they see that neurological difference as a positive in terms of work outcome. If the world can see these people as having gifts, why don't we? We know that God is not limited by anything and in giving gifts to people he also gives the Holy Spirit to help fully live out those gifts.

My Pastor Jason frequently uses the analogy of ditches in his sermons, pointing out that staying far away from one side is not the same as traveling down the road - go too far in the other direction and you still end up in a ditch. That is certainly true for disability.

The ditch we avoid more easily is the murderous, dignity-robbing, God-denying ditch of killing our disabled babies before they are born and killing our disabled elderly when they are considered no longer useful. Evangelical Christians have mostly avoided this one; mostly.

The other ditch no less robs the dignity of God's human creation with disabilities. This ditch sees people with disabilities as recipients of services, inherently 'other,' probably sad about their disability and desiring to be 'normal.' 'They' are then not allowed to express the gifts Jesus himself has given them in Ephesians 2:10 because of how 'we' perceive them. Now, let's be careful here - when my son was born I was very sad, which turned into anger and then deep bitterness. I wanted him to have a better life than I assumed he could have; he actually has a pretty good life. But I didn't believe that at the time and needed the time and experience and

good friends to process it. What I am referring to in this ditch is an overarching narrative that reduces the full life of a person down to a specific set of physical, sensory or cognitive abilities.

Frankly, a significant problem for many people with disabilities, sometimes even greater than their disability, is in how they are treated in the world, and our churches too often reflect this worldly thinking. Yes, disability is real - not being able to walk, see, hear, talk or process rational thoughts makes many things difficult and some things impossible. But the persistent drumbeat of being considered worthless if not 'whole,' of being entirely dependent on you rather than in a reciprocal relationship with you, of only having value coming from receiving the service of others - that's being treated more like a pet than a person. And God creates people, not chattel, even if the social shackles come in velvet gloves.

Too often we deny the murderous intentions of one ditch while sliding headlong into the other with low expectations.

But let me make a different argument from the one place that truly has authority: God's word. God has proclaimed how he acts and through whom he acts:

- 1 Corinthians 1:26–29 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.
 - Four times God refers back to worldly standards, making it clear they are not his standards.
 - When God refers to those who are weak according to worldly standards, we should consider the opposite is actually true - through God, the weak or foolish have greater abilities than worldly people living under worldly standards. Romans 8:8 tells us that worldly people cannot please God no matter their abilities.
 - He tells us in 1 John 4:4: Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (ESV)
 - That person with a disability, filled with the Holy Spirit and having gifts given by Jesus is infinitely more capable of serving the church than someone with great intellect, financial resources or fame who is not of God.
 - Three times in 1 Corinthians 1 God states who he chooses to act for the sake of his name:
 - Foolish in the world to shame the wise - meaning God is more intelligent than the so-called wise.

- Weak in the world to shame the strong - meaning God has greater strength than anyone.
 - What is low and despised in the world to bring to nothing things that are - meaning God exists at greater heights and glory than anything in the world
- Together, we see a picture of God's intentionality in using what the world considers worthless to do infinitely valuable things for the sake of the name of God.
 - Pastor John helpfully expressed it this way: ...God regularly glorifies himself by setting aside human power to magnify his own. By setting aside human wisdom to magnify his own. By setting aside human honor to magnify his own.
- Even the most vulnerable in the world are used by God to magnify his name. And the most vulnerable today are those with severe cognitive disabilities.
- Consider how God speaks of the most vulnerable in the Old Testament:
 - Psalms 8:2: Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger. (ESV)
 - God uses the mouths of those who cannot speak intelligible words to establish strength.
 - I asked Pastor John if he thought Psalm 8:2 could be applied to adults like my son with severe cognitive disabilities, and he agreed this is more about ability than about age.
 - Thus, God has told us again that he uses those the world considers weak, stupid, worthless, expendable, and expensive to magnify his name as warriors.
 - Are we making our churches welcoming and accessible without any thought to preparing God's creations with disabilities for war? Psalm 8:2 is clear: God uses the most vulnerable to establish strength that stills the enemy. The world can't see it, but Satan has experienced it. Might there be a reason why Satan is so eager to destroy children with cognitive disabilities before they are born? Or those living with dementia? Church, have we been putting God's Marines on the sidelines because we live by worldly standards?
 - Or this from Dr. Benjamin Mast about people experiencing Alzheimers:
 - Those with dementia need not speak. Not even the disease's ravages can separate us from God's radical grace and love. We don't really know what turning to him looks like in deep dementia, but we can know that God doesn't require that we have the right words.

Compared to God, we're all weak! But God recognizes we create categories of greater and lesser - and having an evident worldly weakness is held up by God as no weakness at all.

- Consider 1 Corinthians 12:21–22: The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable... (ESV)
 - John Piper helpfully states it this way: That’s a careful way of talking. Paul says they “seem” to be weaker. He leaves open whether they are or not. They may not be. But they seem to be to one side or the other. And he says that if they seem to you to be weaker, they are nevertheless, necessary. Not optional but necessary. Not merely helpful, but necessary. Not maybe a needful part of the body, but NECESSARILY a needful part of the body.

My oldest son is weak in the world in almost every way - intellectually, physically, how he engages the world. When measured against worldly standards, he fails, sometimes not even registering on their scales. Yet, he is a human creation, one of God’s intimate knitting of Psalm 139:13, the ‘all things’ of John 1:3 and even the warrior cast of Psalm 8:2. When the Apostle Paul is talking about ‘in the world’ or ‘according to worldly standards’ or ‘seem to be weaker,’ he is calling out that we cannot see all that God sees and does for his glory.

Will you believe God’s word? Will you embrace God’s design of the weaker member “in the world” as the necessary one to the health of your church?

Which leads to my second question: Your church can’t do everything on this issue of disability, but it can do something. Something meant for your church while also being good for the church universal. Will you do it? I can’t tell you what is best or right for your church in the specifics, but I can invite any church to do these six things:

What Pastors and Elders Can Do

1. Pray

- For yourself - your perspective about disability is probably driven by our culture rather than by God’s word. I don’t say that to condemn you; I was that way before my son was born. Ask God to help you see with spiritual eyes those God has given you who live an atypical life. Ask him to help you understand his word.
- For your people - even if your perspective about disability is biblical, your people live in this culture which hates people with disabilities. Pray for them to see rightly the inherent dignity and worth God has given in all God’s human creation.
- For wisdom - what might God be pleased to do through your church? Ask for his wisdom, which he has promised to give you.
- Encourage your people to pray, deputize people to pray specifically about this issue and your church. God will help you.
 - For example, we had a year-long season of prayer at Bethlehem, initiated and led by someone who did not have a disability or a disabled family member. Out of that season of prayer our elders committed to investing in the disability ministry in a more significant way.

2. Know your people

- Just as we seek intimacy with God through prayer, seek to know your people for who they are in all their giftings and needs.
- Who has God already given to you? This is not about creating programs, though you might do that. Small churches have an advantage here but larger churches and megachurches can do this as well. Do your elders know their people for whom they will give an account? Again, let me be clear, this is not for the purpose of your rescuing or fixing or saving a person or family experiencing disability. This is about releasing the gifts Jesus himself gave them for the good of your church and for the fame of God's name. Know your people - their names, their circumstances, their needs, their giftings.
- Know the entire family if you can, and let the siblings be their own people. We families tend to live in a fishbowl which can make church hard for siblings. In fact, everything can be harder for siblings - less parental attention, fewer financial resources, heightened expectations about how they should or shouldn't behave or feel. God created them uniquely, too.

3. Preach

- Preach on the disability passages. But preach what is there, not what you want to be there or think is there based on your cultural assumptions.
 - Attack low expectations and misunderstandings in your people by highlighting what God is actually doing.
 - For example, when I was a child I was taught how nice God is to heal people, like Namaan of his leprosy or the paralytic of Mark 2.
 - 2 Kings 5 is not about God being nice to a leper but about a violent, foreign pagan enemy of the people of God making a public proclamation that there is no God in all the world but the God of Israel.
 - Mark 2 is not about Jesus being nice to a paralytic but about Jesus proclaiming his authority to forgive sins to a disbelieving group of Jewish leaders.
 - Even little children can be invited into the sovereignty of God, and should be.
 - Please, avoid disability porn. That sounds ugly, doesn't it? Here's what I mean: like pornography, disability porn objectifies a person, making them a tool for your use and sermon illustrations, making them remarkable not because they have done something remarkable, but because they are disabled. Have you seen the commercial where the young people with Down syndrome are running a race and one falls down? All of them gather around him and together they cross the finish line under the banner 'True Victory.'. So heartwarming - and totally bogus. That's a myth because the real race that happened decades ago did involve a runner falling - and the ones in front kept going because it was a race! A couple of young people stopped to help him and a myth is born that all people

with Down syndrome don't care about competing but about loving each other. No, no, no - they are real people with real gifts, sinful tendencies and unique experiences - not innocent waifs we can fawn over in our superiority. My son with cancer thinks people calling him brave as he goes through treatments are silly. What's he supposed to do?

- If you avoid disability porn you will also avoid satanic sentimentality around disability. Satan would like you to be sentimental and kind, doing nice things and neglecting the greater thing.
 - Is the young man who became disabled in an accident a project of the church or a human being in search of his place in the world in his new reality? Do you love him, or the idea of rescuing him?
 - Are you willing to pursue those individuals and families living an atypical life because of disability in love where their greatest need is? Satan would like to trap you into a single response where you provide service and they get to receive service, reinforcing a hierarchy of greater than and less than between people of differing physical, cognitive, emotional or behavioral abilities.
- Pastor, when you preach on the disability passages, do they hear the simpering sentimentality of Satan, or do they hear the Lion of Judah roaring about the majesty of God in all circumstances?

4. Do something

- You've prayed, you are growing in your knowledge of your people and their needs and giftings, you've prepared your people to think differently as you preach a God-honoring, counter-cultural view of God's sovereignty over all things. Do something based on real needs and real opportunities. This includes obvious and simple things: is your building accessible? Is your signage clear? Are your greeters fearless in welcoming all? Make mistakes out of love rather than plan and plan and plan out of fear.
- Please, call men into this engagement, and not just men who are experiencing disability in themselves or their families. This is not just an issue for women.
- Don't have the moms of the disabled kids do everything. Yes, they have more experience, greater empathy, more knowledge and are probably best qualified. But they also live in a world that hates their children and where they carry unusual burdens. Yes, their gifts may be perfectly aligned, but make sure you are aware of their needs before placing the ministry on their shoulders. Those gifts might better be used at some point in the future.
- Trust that God will provide, sometimes in unusual ways:
 - Story: An old saint once came up to me and said, "I love those idiot children. I love those mongoloid children" - those terms have been offensive for decades and I was in season where to love me was to use the right language. The Holy Spirit impressed upon me, what do you want? What do you really want? Because here was her full statement - I love Pauley; I pray for him every day. I pray for you and Dianne every

day. The tsunami of love that poured from her made me answer the Holy Spirit's question this way: I want that love and that regard. She could use whatever words she wants as long as she loves me that way. God intruded in an offensive way to wake me up. Do you trust the Holy Spirit will help you like that?

- Recognize that compassion fatigue is real. Disability is often over a lifetime. Families like mine can experience long seasons of relative normalcy, and then something happens and we're struggling again. For me it was when my son turned 13 and all that we were missing as he entered adolescence. I was prepared for 16 and 18 to be hard, and the Lord was gracious in helping. Then my youngest got cancer and everything felt like it was crashing down around me. You'll get tired of our issues (I can assure you, I get tired of my issues), your people will get tired of our issues. Ask God to help by calling others into the lives of your families experiencing disability.
5. Be careful before taking sides on disability issues. I'm not saying not to take sides when necessary; I'm just cautioning to be careful. This is biblical:
- 2 Timothy 2:22–26 encourages us to have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies - and there is plenty of potential controversy between families.
 - Example: Nutrition - one family experiences a benefit in their child and starts to evangelize it for all children with diagnoses like theirs. It can turn to bullying veiled in concern pretty quickly.
 - Example: Autism - one family seeks every measure possible to address their child's behaviors related to his autism; an adult on the spectrum embraces his autism as another characteristic like hair color or height.
 - Example: An older member does everything possible to hide or ameliorate his deteriorating hearing while a deaf member expresses great pride in her deaf community and culture.
 - What does love informed by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit lead you to do in these cases? And how will you lead people to be gracious in all circumstances?
6. Expect blessing to come, anticipate blessing to come. It will look different than you predict, and it might take a long time. But it will come and you will experience more of God.

I can't tell you what is best or right for your church in the specifics. But I can ask, will you respond in faith when someone living this life comes to your church? Will you pray? Will you act? Will you live expectantly that God will help you recognize and use the gifts he is giving you in all your people at every stage of life? God will help you on this and every issue. Do you believe it? Will you do it?