

# There Is No Health in Us

BY DENNIS L. SANSON

The confession in earlier editions of the **BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER**, “there is no health in us,” captures an important truth. Though we are weak in body and often perverse in our wills, we nonetheless can receive God’s love and providential direction that can make our lives whole.

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**I**n the middle of the Sermon on the Mount we encounter this puzzler: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matthew 6:22-23). Jesus is making a subtle point. The eye is only part of the body, but it can give light or darkness to the whole body. Obviously, Jesus is not only thinking of the eye as a physical organ; the eye figuratively represents our aim in life, and the body takes on the characteristics of this aim. If we look to love the neighbor, for instance, then our entire bodies – our lives with others – radiate this purpose.

What did Jesus mean by the eye’s health? Physical health, of course, does not guarantee moral and spiritual health, and it is possible to be morally and spiritually healthy but not enjoy physical health. This distinction between physical and moral and spiritual health shows that we usually think of physical health as the proper functioning of our body and moral health as fulfillment of our purpose as humans. The physical health of our eye does not guarantee we will reach our chief aim of a good life, nor does its being physically damaged or ill prevent us from reaching this goal. Our eye’s moral and spiritual health does that.

When Jesus talked about the “eye” being healthy, I believe he used the moral sense of health. If the eye is healthy, we are full of light. If we are properly aimed toward life’s chief good, that which fulfills all our aims, then our whole lives testify to the greatness of the aim.



This understanding of moral health does not require us to reject the value of physical health. We often say “if you have your health, you have it all.” It is an understandable phrase. When we suffer a great deal, we cannot accomplish our daily activities and goals. Physical illness is debilitating; pain discombobulates us to the point that we cannot carry on with our lives.

Often, Jesus healed people of their physical illness. As a healer he was concerned with the physical well-being of people. Though he did not heal everyone he met, he was moved with compassion to restore people to their natural state so that they could continue with their lives and in some instances also testify to the breaking in of the Kingdom of God into a world of sickness, sin, and evil. Jesus’ miracles, of course, did not endow the recipients with extraordinary human physical powers. They probably became ill again, and all eventually died due to physical failure. But Jesus saw a value in affirming their bodies.

God creates us as body and soul, and God values our lives. It follows that we should also value our lives, body and soul. We show appreciation for being created by a God who values us as body and soul when we work for a healthy body and soul.

It is no accident that two of the seven deadly sins, gluttony and sloth, are ways of undervaluing and mistreating our physical life. Gluttony comes from an obsession with physical appetite. Sloth springs from an utter indifference to the importance of life. Gluttonous persons ruin their lives by thinking only of their physical appetite. Slothful persons sicken their lives by ignoring the bodily necessities. The common denominator between the two vices is total self-centeredness. The gluttonous and slothful persons, though opposite in their activity, are making the same kind of mistake: they do not see any value higher than their own interest. The glutton ingratiate the self, and the slothful determines that everything but the self is devoid of interest.

Because we value being God’s creatures, made to participate in a world full of bounty and wonder and to enjoy these with God forever, we should try to be healthy out of gratitude to God for life. Yet we should not make physical health an absolute value. Jesus did not.

Jesus never promised to restore everyone to physical health from their illnesses. We have no record of his healing a person twice; he did not guarantee permanent health to those he healed; and he did not prevent Lazarus, whom he resuscitated from the grave, from eventually suffering and dying. Physical health is a good possession, but we know that God does not guarantee that we will always have it. From this perspective, we can say that health is a relative value for the Christian, not an absolute one. We can be grateful for health and we should work for it, but we should not make health a final aim.



Two famous statues, the *Apollo Belvedere* and Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, embody different understandings of human beauty and purpose. In them, I suggest, we can glimpse this distinction between physical health and moral health that will deepen our understanding of Jesus' teaching.

This image is  
available in the print  
version of *Health*.

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*APOLLO BELVEDERE*, c. 350-320 B.C. Marble, lifesize. Museo Pio Clementino, Vatican Museums, Vatican State. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

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*Apollo Belvedere* is the most famous depiction of the Greek sun-god Apollo. Named for its placement in the Octagonal Courtyard of the Belvedere of the Pio Clementino Vatican Museum, it is a marble copy (perhaps

from the time of the Roman emperor Hadrian, A.D. 117-138) based on a bronze sculpture by the Greek artist Leochares (c. 350-320 B.C.).<sup>1</sup> Apollo is depicted as the epitome of health and beauty in the classical Greek sense: his body has symmetry, balance, and proportion, and it glows with divine beauty in that it has no flaws, blemishes, or disabilities.

A mortal might achieve Apollo's kind of physical perfection, the ancients believed, as the reward of a fulfilled life. Health in this view is an absolute value: only as we draw close to such physical perfection and resemble the gods do we maximize our human potential.

However, this idealized vision of health, though for centuries it has been inspiring, is practically unattainable. Perfect physical symmetry, balance, and proportion are impossible goals. No matter how hard we exercise, how often we diet, or how artificially we reconstruct our bodies, we cannot look like Apollo. Nor should we try. We do not have to be like a god to find fulfillment as a creature. Our purpose is attainable within our imperfect lives.

Yet in our "beauty-culture" where supermodels and bodybuilders are the standards for health, we continue to deceive ourselves in thinking that if we only looked like them, we would have real personal fulfillment. Indeed, as standards of health, these icons do more harm than good. They impose an unreal image of what we should be and consequently cause us to experience inferiority and guilt.



In Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, the chapel decoration in the Roman church Santa Maria della Vittoria, we encounter a different sense of human health and beauty. A flowing cape covers the saint's body, revealing only her face, hands, and feet. Her head is tilted back with her eyes closed and mouth open in a state of rapture. Though we see Teresa's gentle and very feminine beauty, we are most drawn not to these, but to her experience.<sup>2</sup>

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) was a sixteenth-century Carmelite nun, who with St. John of the Cross transformed a decaying order of convents in Spain.<sup>3</sup> She managed to travel, teach, and write much, though she suffered greatly with long bouts of vomiting. At times she was given up for dead. Though Teresa had been extraordinarily beautiful as a young woman, her suffering caused her to age prematurely.

Bernini depicts Teresa's "transverbervation," a unique spiritual experience in 1560 that she likened to an angel piercing her with an arrow. Afterward, she was aflame with the love of God; she wrote some of the most important spiritual theology in the Church's history, *The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle*, and successfully completed the Carmelite reforms.

She was remarkable in her work and person, and her illness did not prevent her from fulfilling her vocation. Though Teresa did not have physical

health, she had moral and spiritual health. The depth of her commitment to the cause of reform coupled with her intense spiritual experiences gave her an ability to reach her goals. Her eye was healthy, to use Jesus' phrase, though her physical health was lacking.

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*Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680). THE ECSTASY OF ST. TERESA, 1645-52. Marble, lifesize. Cornaro Chapel, Sta. Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

St. Teresa's model of moral health stands as a corrective to a superficial spirituality often called "the gospel of health and wealth," which teaches that those who are pleasing to God will be blessed with physical health and financial wealth. In practice, believers in this false gospel often reverse the central idea and conclude that those who enjoy health and wealth are in God's favor.

Though it has an obvious appeal to our personal happiness, the health and wealth gospel is terribly wrong. It assumes that we have to earn God's blessing and deserve the rewards of it. The heart of the true good news is that God's love toward us precedes our response to God. We do not have to earn God's pleasure. Jesus told his confused disciples, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

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Our acts of devotion do not establish the ransom; rather, Christ's ransom—his suffering for the sins of the world—makes possible our devotion. We have this relationship with God whether we are healthy or not.

In fact, the gospel of health and wealth reflects the view of health epitomized in the *Apollo Belvedere*: we should be like God, alike in power and

strength. Yet this view misses the profound point in Jesus' teaching, "If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light." We resemble God not in our physical health, but in our moral and spiritual commitments. Though we may be hindered physically and emotionally, our lives may be filled with light, with an orientation toward the great fulfillment that God's love brings to all people and even the cosmos. We can have assurance that the ransom Christ paid secures that love toward us. St. Teresa experienced this divine love, and Bernini's great sculpture expresses her moral health.



In older editions of the *Book of Common Prayer*, this phrase occurs in the confession for the Morning and Evening Prayers: "there is no health in us." The newer versions omit it, perhaps, because it seems too negative about our spiritual condition. However, it captures an important truth about Christian spirituality. The prayer continues, "But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders."

We can receive God's mercy, the great bounty of God's love and providential direction, without needing to be perfectly healthy, either in the body or soul. Even impaired by our physical, emotional, and moral limitations, we can orient ourselves toward a greater reality than our own body and soul. Though we are weak in body, often perverse in our wills, and unable to reach the beauty of Apollo, we nonetheless can live in the divine grace and love that imbues all of our lives with God's presence.

*Our gracious Lord,  
who gives us the wonder of existing  
as both creatures of the earth  
and your beloved children,  
we turn our eyes toward you,  
seeing your beauty and glory  
and being drawn to your holiness and righteousness.  
May we be so pierced with your love,  
as was St. Teresa,  
that in health or illness  
your light may shine through us.  
Amen.*

## NOTES

1 Luca Leoncini, "Apollo Belvedere," Grove Art Online, Oxford University Press, accessed December 14, 2006, [www.groveart.com](http://www.groveart.com).

2 For more information on Bernini's sculpture, see Heidi J. Hornik, "Yearning for God," *Mysticism*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 17 (Fall 2005), 60-62, available online at [www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws).

3 For her work in founding the discalced (shoeless) Carmelites, Teresa was declared a saint in 1662. In 1970, Pope Paul VI named her a Doctor of the Church. She is the first woman ever to receive this designation, which signifies that the whole Church can benefit from her theological writings.



### **DENNIS L. SANSON**

*is Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Samford University,  
in Birmingham, Alabama.*