



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 There Is No Health in Us
(*Health*, pp. 63-69)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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There Is No Health in Us

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.

Prayer

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, that in health or illness your light may shine through us. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:33-37

Responsive Reading: Matthew 6:22-23

Jesus taught his disciples, “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!”

Reflection

How should we interpret Jesus’ puzzler about the healthy eye? “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,” Dennis Sansom writes. “If we look to love the neighbor, for instance, then our entire bodies—our lives with others—radiate this purpose.”

Physical health, or the proper functioning of the body, is quite different from *moral* or *spiritual health*, which is the fulfillment of our purpose as human beings. Jesus warns us to have a *morally* healthy ‘eye,’ Sansom suggests. “If the eye is healthy, we are full of light ... [and] properly aimed toward life’s chief good.” Of course, *physical* health is a good gift from God, and Jesus often healed people’s diseases. So, “we should try to be healthy out of gratitude to God for life,” Sansom notes. “Yet we should not make physical health an absolute value. Jesus did not.”

To deepen our understanding of Jesus’ teaching, Sansom studies two famous statues that embody opposing views of human beauty and purpose.

- ▶ *Apollo Belvedere* portrays the Greek sun-god with perfect proportions and without flaws or disabilities. This is what we can look like, the ancients believed, if we live well. Yet this ideal, still popular in our “beauty-culture,” is practically unattainable, Sansom notes. “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.”
- ▶ Bernini’s *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* projects a different idea of human health. Not the saint’s body, but her experience of rapturous



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love is the focus. Though Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) “suffered greatly with long bouts of vomiting” and this “suffering caused her to age prematurely,” with her travels, writing, and teaching she reformed the Carmelite order of convents in Spain. Most important, her moral health was not a reward, but a gift from God. “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.”

Likewise, the departing hymn reminds us that spiritual health is God’s gift, not our accomplishment. It recalls Jeremiah weeping for Jerusalem’s coming exile and asking, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician *there*?” (8:21-22). He knew there was an abundance of curative balm in the trees of Gilead just across the Jordan River, but the people stubbornly refused to seek its remedy! Notice how the African slaves, enduring their brutal exile in the United States, subtly reversed the prophet’s image. “There is a balm in Gilead,” the spiritual confidently proclaims, but it’s not a remedy we must collect and apply to our wounds. Rather, the “balm” is a person, Jesus Christ, who comes to us and touches us in the midst of our desperate need.

Study Questions

1. What are the key differences between the views of health depicted in *Apollo Belevvedere* and *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*?
2. Dennis Sansom notes, “It is no accident that two of the seven deadly sins, gluttony and sloth, are ways of undervaluing and mistreating our physical life.” Why is this significant?
3. What does it mean to say physical health is a relative value, but not an absolute value for a Christian? How are we tempted to forget this in our “beauty-culture”?

Departing Hymn: “There Is a Balm in Gilead”

*There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*

Some times I feel discouraged,
and think my work’s in vain,
but then the Holy Spirit
revives my soul again.

Refrain

If you can’t preach like Peter,
if you can’t pray like Paul,
just tell the love of Jesus,
and say he died for all.

Refrain

Traditional African American Spiritual

There Is No Health in Us

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To interpret Jesus' puzzling teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about a "healthy eye."
2. To contrast the ideals of physical health as an absolute value and physical health as a relative value in relation to spiritual (or moral) health.
3. To consider the role of grace in achieving health.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Health (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Comment

In "The Idolatry of Health and the Idolatry of Life," theologian Margaret Mohrmann warns, "God is our absolute good; [physical] health is an instrumental, subordinate good, important only insofar as it enables us to be the joyful, whole persons God has created us to be and to perform the service to our neighbors that God calls us to perform. Any pursuit of personal health that subverts either of these obligations of joy and loving service is the pursuit of a false god. Health is to be sought in and for God, not instead of God" (quoted in *Health*, p. 62).

In our "beauty-culture," this is a warning that we need to hear. How do we idolize physical health to the detriment of our spiritual health?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 119:33-37 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Dennis Sansom relates the definition of health as wholeness and well-being to Jesus' puzzling teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about the healthy eye. He suggests that Jesus is talking about *moral* or *spiritual* health rather than *physical* health; in other words, while Jesus does not reject the value of physical health, he is more concerned that we properly 'see' and desire the good – that we love neighbor and God – than that our eyes function well physically. "Physical health, of course, does not guarantee moral and spiritual health," Sansom claims, "and it is possible to be morally and spiritually healthy but not enjoy physical health."

To explain these points, Sansom contrasts *Apollo Belvedere* and *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. Photos of these sculptures are on pp. 65 and 67 in *Health*; or you can find images of them on the Internet. Heidi Hornik pro-

vides more analysis of *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* in "Yearning for God" in *Mysticism, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 17 (October 2005), 60-62. This article is available for free download in the Ethics Library at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

Study Questions

1. Sansom suggests three key differences: (1) the role of physical perfection, (2) the relationship between physical perfection and moral or spiritual health, and (3) the source of health.

Apollo portrays physical perfection, for "his body has symmetry, balance, and proportion, and it glows with divine beauty in that it has no flaws, blemishes, or disabilities." While *Teresa* depicts the saint's "gentle and very feminine beauty," the focus is on her experience. "I saw an angel beside me toward the left side, in bodily form," Teresa wrote of her mystical experience. "He was not very large, but small, very beautiful, his face so blazing with light that he seemed to be one of the very highest angels, who appear all on fire. They must be those they call Cherubim.... I saw in his hands a long dart of gold, and at the end of the iron there seemed to me to be a little fire. This I thought he thrust through my heart several times, and that it reached my very entrails. As he withdrew it, I thought it brought them with it, and left me all burning with a great love of God. So great was the pain, that it made me give those moans; and so utter the sweetness that this sharpest of pains gave me, that there was no wanting it to stop, nor is there any contenting of the soul with less than God."

Second, *Apollo* represents a physical reward for a well-lived life. Sansom finds a secular version of this view "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." A religious version is "'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."

Finally, *Teresa* suggests that because moral health is a divine gift rather than an accomplishment, it is available to all who will receive it. "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."

2. We should honor our bodies and try to be physically healthy, Sansom says, because God created us "to participate in a world full of bounty and wonder and to enjoy these with God forever." In different ways, gluttony and sloth (understood here as taking too little interest in the joy of embodied life before God) do not respect this created purpose. They are "ways of undervaluing and mistreating our physical life. Gluttony comes from an obsession with physical appetite.... 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."
3. Review the high value Scripture puts on physical health: God's creative activity, Christ's healing ministry, and the promise of physical resurrection emphasize the great joy of a flourishing embodied life before God. Yet, while "we can be grateful for health and we should work for it, but we should not make health a final aim."

When we make "supermodels and bodybuilders...the standards for health," we reduce health to an unrealistic model of physical perfection, and disregard the value of our moral development and relationships with friends, family, neighbors, and God. Encourage members to brainstorm how these distorted values influence our spending for healthcare.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.