

LOVING AND SERVING CHRONICALLY ILL PEOPLE

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As she sat in the oncology waiting room, she spied a nurse that greeted her with a smile and escorted her husband back to the area where he would shortly receive Benadryl and his chemotherapy treatment. As the nurse came by to give the wife a status update, the wife motioned for the nurse to sit down. Tears welled up in the wife's eyes and rolled down her cheeks as she said, "I do not understand why he is so short and rude with me. I do everything in my power to help him. I take him to all the appointments, care for him in our home, and he seems so bitter and unappreciative of me." This same nurse would later tell a therapist that this was not uncommon among family members of chronically ill patients.

Interaction with people who are suffering may be difficult. Perhaps one has a spouse or family member who is dealing with a debilitating, painful illness on a continual basis. Maybe the preceding vignette is all too familiar to you and the situation that you face on a regular basis. There are some things that we need to remember about ministering to those who are chronically ill.

First, our illnesses tend to heighten mundane or otherwise tense situations. That is, when a person feels bad, they can be very short with people whom they might not have mistreated in the past. Sometimes a person's pain is so intense that they cannot cope with the most trivial of life's problems. Pain oftentimes is coupled with the bitterness that comes from being unable to function as one once had in times past. Suffice it to say, there are people who suffer so badly that even rest brings no solace or relief.

One notes from scripture that Job was in so much pain that he could not lay down and rest. As a matter of fact, he preferred death over rest. He said, **"When I say, My bed shall comfort me, my couch shall ease my complaint; Then thou scarest me with dreams, and terrifiest me through visions: So that my soul chooseth strangling, and death rather than my life"** (Job 7:13-15). There are people who hurt so badly that they cannot sleep.

In some situations, we must realize that it is the "illness talking" and not the person. Certain diseases—especially neurological ones—can cause a person to say and do things that they might not ever do if they were in their right mind. Perhaps some reading this treatise have heard members of their family beg for death or wish to have never been born. Job did these very same things. He said, **"Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived. Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it. Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; let a cloud dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. As for that night, let darkness seize upon it; let it not be joined unto the days of the year, let it not come into the number of the months"** (Job 3:3-6). Job was in so much mental and physical pain that he wished he had never been born. We should not be terribly surprised when a suffering person says something out of character.

Loving a person can mean living sacrificially for their welfare—even when you feel mistreated. Jesus died for the sins of the world. He even died for those who gleefully stood before His cross and ridiculed His precious name (Lk. 22:32-39). Our soul's salvation is not dependent upon how we are treated by others. However, how we treat others will impact our eternal destination.

Furthermore, one who is chronically ill is intimately aware of their condition. That is, they do not need people explaining how they feel when others truly have an incomplete understanding. The patriarch Job was the only one who was qualified to explain his pain and suffering. He said, **“When I lie down, I say, When shall I arise, and the night be gone? and I am full of tossings to and fro unto the dawning of the day. My flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust; my skin is broken, and become loathsome. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope”** (Job 7:4-6).

If the chronically ill person is a spouse, you have an oath-bound responsibility to care for that individual. Certain marriage vows have the phrase “in sickness and health” in their context. A vow is something which God takes seriously, and married people should do the same (Eccl. 5:4-5). It is sad and tragic when a spouse forsakes a mate at their greatest time of physical need.

Several years ago, Pat Robertson made the comment that it would be okay for a man to divorce his wife as she struggled with Alzheimer's disease and subsequently start dating again with a view towards remarriage. Such comments are heartless and devoid of true compassion. In reality, we are bound to our spouses until death (Rom. 7:2-3).

If the chronically ill person needs care in the context of marriage, traditional roles might need to be changed. That is, the one who is well might need to take on more of the domestic responsibilities. There might be some limitations to this if the well spouse is the primary source of income, but it does not hurt a husband to wash clothes, sweep the floor and wash dishes for a chronically ill spouse. An appeal to reason might be necessary in this context.

Moreover, it would be absurd to expect one who deals with chronic illness to function in the exact same way before developing their disease. We should not be so rigid in our views of domestic responsibilities, especially in consideration of chronic illness. We need to be willing servants in such situations (Phil. 2:5-8).

Finally, I would encourage those dealing with chronically ill individuals to be patient. Please understand that their pain causes them to be short and even rude with people at times. In the vast majority of cases, they would not normally act that way. Solomon wrote, **“Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit”** (Eccl. 7:8). Paul wrote, **“Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men”** (1 Thess. 5:14).

To the one who is chronically ill, as much as it is possible try to be patient and kind toward those who attempt to help you. Those trying to help will not always understand the pain you are

enduring. They will make mistakes in your care and say the wrong thing at times. Remember Ephesians 4:31-32.

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