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Matthew 15:29–31 ESV

²⁹ Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. ³⁰ And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, ³¹ so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.

Leviticus 19:14 ESV

¹⁴ You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

Job 29:15 ESV

I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame.

Hebrews 12:12–13 ESV

¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

Accommodations.

When I was a teenager, the optometrist that my mother took me to started having problems giving me a correct glasses prescription, one that would give me clear, 20/20 vision. It wasn't diagnosed until I was twenty-eight, but the problem was that I had diseased corneas. I'll talk in more detail about this some other

Sunday, but for now, what's important is that for much of my professional life as a professor, I had significantly reduced vision, and I eventually received corneal transplants, starting in 2008. I now have close to 20/20 vision, as long as I wear fairly powerful scleral (or gigantic) hard contact lenses. God has blessed me with the gift of other people's corneas. But let's start with our first reading.

Chapters 14 and 15 of the Gospel of Matthew cover the period of time when John the Baptist is killed, and where Jesus feeds five thousand people, walks on water, and performs a number of healings. So, our reading is from the middle of Jesus' ministry. It is from near the end of Chapter 15. In it, Jesus is meeting with Gentiles and the faith is beginning to spread to non-Jews. Just before our passage, Jesus cures a young woman who is mentally ill. In our passage, we are told in a sweeping way that Jesus cures many severely disabled people: *And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them,³¹ so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.* We don't use that word crippled anymore, and I wish the ESV would use the word disabled, but the point of our passage is two-fold: first, Jesus turns into a sort of mobile miracle clinic, where very sick people are brought to wherever he happens

to be, and they are cured. Second, and this is really the point of the passage, and in fact, of this entire section of the Book of Matthew - those who are healed and those who witness these healings praise God and understand that they are seeing the grace of God displayed in a magnificent way. The miracles of Jesus aren't meant to spook people into obeying God. They are meant to inspire people to trust and follow a God who wants only the best for the people of the earth. So, I do want to begin today by saying that when I received corneas from donors and thereby regained my vision, was indeed extremely gratified and humbled, and I was inspired to rededicate my life to God.

But having said that, let's look at the nastier side of being disabled or having any sort of chronic medical condition that can interfere earning a living, taking care of one's family, taking full part in society, or being accepted as a normal person. Let's look at our quote from Leviticus. Most likely, this is the Book of the Bible that interests you the most. (This is a joke; much of Leviticus is an extraordinarily tedious compilation of religious rules that controlled the everyday life of ancient Jews, but we are concerned with aspects of the Book that relate to us today.). Leviticus is the third of the five books of the Bible that have traditionally been attributed to Moses, although very few people actually think that Moses wrote them. The other four books are: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers,

and Deuteronomy, and his authorship of all five of these books is heavily questioned. Leviticus is dedicated to helping the people of Israel be holy in their daily lives. It lays out extremely demanding goals for living as a sincere, faithful Jew. Like Exodus, the book before it, Leviticus is set at the base of Mount Sinai. In Leviticus, God speaks to Moses from the tent where the tabernacle, which holds the ten commandments, have been stored (at the end of Exodus). The book lays out detailed rules for offering sacrifices to God. Various men are consecrated as holy priests. Laws of purification are detailed; they tell us how to keep animals clean, and what women should do after childbirth. We are then told how to test for leprosy. After this we are given the Holiness Code, which tells the average person how to live a pure life. This part is still very, very relevant today in America. In our chapter, 19, we are given instruction on how to live in an ethical way. We're told how to treat the poor and those who are marginalized by society. We're given rules on treating employees.

Our passage says this: *¹⁴ You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.* We might wonder why this needs to be said. Who's going to torment a blind person by putting something in front of him so that he stumbles? But the more general point of this passage is this: God pays attention to cruelty. We are to behave with

compassion and empathy for those who have disabilities. When we don't, we can expect God to respond.

Our next passage is from Job. Remember that Job is a wealthy man with a huge family, a big estate, and extensive livestock. He is blameless and upright. He serves as a priest for his family. Just in case any of his ten kids sins, he sacrifices a burnt offering for each of them every single day. But then Satan argues this to God: Job is a good man only because God has blessed him so much. God then allows Satan to test Job – and then really horrible things happen to Job, but he never loses his faith in, and trust of, God. Job is a story of innocent suffering that is met with a refusal to deny God. Our passage says the following: *I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame.* This is the middle of an extended passage where Job is telling God what a good man he has been and how much of a benefit he has been to his community. He only wants to be freed from his suffering and get back to being that great man who serves those in need. The point is that those who are in need, even people who do not know Job, have a long history of turning to him when no one else will help them. God knows this.

So, putting our passages from Leviticus and Job together, we see that not only should we not abuse the disabled, we should reach out and extend ourselves to help them. We should be proactive, not passive in support of the disabled.

Now, before I was a professor, I would have thought that this would be a pretty obvious lesson, that our society is well aware that this is how we are to behave. But that's not how I was treated by the University of Colorado at Boulder School of Engineering and the Department of Computer Science. In truth, they weren't good to me at all. Whenever I asked for a modest accommodation, I was turned down flat. To get a Teaching Assistant for a class you had to have a certain number of students in your class. This was decided dynamically each semester, but let's just assume the number was thirty. If I had twenty-eight students and asked for a T.A. because I couldn't read papers to grade them, I was told no. Period. No. I won't list any more complaints, but similar requests were denied repeatedly. These things would have cost the university almost nothing, and money was not the issue. My point isn't to complain about my former employer, it's to point out that our society has become fiercely competitive. The problem at the university was that they wanted me to continue to bring in millions of dollars of research grants, and to place my Ph.D. students in prominent places - to be important – not be some disabled guy. Now, academics are particularly selfish and vicious. But they're just a heightened example of what happens when the media tells us to worship people who have become wealthy or famous or powerful, not those who truly contribute to the well-being of others. Society tells

us not to value people who are simply regular people with regular problems living in a Godly way - and a disabled person seems like a person with problems, not someone who is important. The last thing we should do is ask other important people to waste some of their time or mental energy being humane.

But let's get to our last quote, from Hebrews. It's very intriguing. First, though, we don't know who wrote Hebrews. Some have suggested Paul. But the style, vocabulary, and the emphases in the sentence structure are very different from Paul's Greek. The writer of this letter – whoever it was – was very literate. Hebrews has a rich vocabulary and eloquent Greek. It quotes the Old Testament frequently. It offers a firm warning for sinners and a warm encouragement for the faithful. Hebrews is about Jesus, who he is, and what he has done for us. It tells us to take action in order to actively become more like Jesus Christ. That's what our quote says:¹² *Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,* ¹³ *and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.* The context of our passage is this: Hebrews is addressed to believers who feel that their lives have been hard, but that their strength is limited. They are only human. But a self-pitying person doesn't profit from guidance. The author, whomever it is, has hands that have grown weary and knees that have become weak, meaning that their spirit is

broken by all they have had to put up with. They are lame in the sense that they have become beaten up by constantly running along rough paths. So, it's time to heal, to train on level ground and regain strength and health – spiritually, that is. Here, we see physical disability as a metaphor for spiritual disability. The injuries of a physical body represent the damage done to one's soul and spirit when life is tough and there is still a long way to go in our service to God and humanity. From a spiritual perspective, we have to see ourselves as athletes in training: we need to remember that we are *all* disabled. And society is not going to accommodate us. Society doesn't value someone who is trying to be powerful as a spiritual person, because that is a waste of time. My vision disability became, for me, a metaphor for my spiritual disability. I was worn out from being an important academic and needed support from others, not just physically, but spiritually. My problem with my eyes made me realize that I had a problem with my spiritual life, and that I was focusing on the wrong thing. It wasn't my broken eyes that needed help – it was my broken spirit.

One day, when I was particularly frustrated that the university wouldn't give me any help with my class, despite the fact that I could only see the front row of students and couldn't possibly read student handwriting, I was sitting at home in the evening with a bag of exams that needed grading. Our two oldest kids, our

daughters, were in middle school at the time. I explained the material the test covered and showed them how to grade the questions. Now, as it turned out, this was an advanced class. So, a sixth grader and an eighth grader graded the exams for a post-graduate class. They did a good job, actually. But I realized that I needed to focus on fighting a different battle. I needed to let go of my determination to fight my disability, to fight for my rights to be accommodated. It was time to leave that world and fight the more important battle: the one for the health of my spirit, my soul, my relationship to God, and my ability to take care of others rather than take care of myself. Please pray with me.

God, while society encourages us to build our physical, mental, and emotional strength so that we can achieve as much as possible in this life, it does not encourage us to focus on our spiritual health. It is considered a waste of time, something that won't gain us any benefit here on earth. And to society, there is nothing else other than this life. But we live in your kingdom now. We will live in your kingdom forever. We know that this means that we must build our spiritual strength. Like anyone with a disability, we need help. That help can only come from you and from fellow believers. Please fill us with your empowering grace and please help us heal and grow each other. Let us be the eyes to the blind of faith and feet to the lame of spirit. Amen.