



## SPECIAL NEEDS AWARENESS

April 25, 2015

### Sermon: From Rejected to Respected

When Jesus and the disciples walked through a town and saw a man who was born blind, the disciples asked Jesus a question about the cause of this man's blindness: was it his parents' fault or his own fault for being blind? That question has haunted the disabled for thousands of years by society.

As a child in Mexico, at the age of about 19 months, my wife, Francesca, suffered from scarlet fever, which destroyed her hearing. Her mother was devastated by this. As a devout Catholic, she thought it was a curse for something she might have done to displease God. It was very difficult for her to cope with the fact that her beautiful daughter had become deaf in a society that did not understand.

In the story of the man born blind from birth in John 9, Jesus rejected the disciples' wrong concept of the disabled. He made a strong point that this man would be a demonstration of God's love and power of healing despite the cause of his blindness. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him" (v. 3).<sup>1</sup> In Jesus' time society considered the disabled as the unfortunate, as a curse from God. Those with disabilities were shunned by society as unfit. In Greece disabled infants were taken to the mountains to die. The disabled were not accepted in the "perfect race" society.

In the same way Francisca's mother, had the wrong concept of disabilities. She felt terrible about it; she was concerned about how her family members would think of her deaf daughter. Fortunately, her mother's love was very strong, and she determined to raise her the same as any child, despite the communication barrier and misunderstandings. She loved her very much.

It wasn't Francisca or her mother's fault that she became deaf. In most cases the disabilities are caused by the effects of sin in this world. Francisca became deaf through scarlet fever. This has been and is still true for many disabled people. God has made it clear not to misjudge or neglect the disabled, but to show mercy and support. It is true that some children were born disabled because of their parents' decisions and behaviors. It is true that some children and adults become deaf because of their own sinful actions, but it is not our place to judge them. We must follow the command of God by showing love and mercy to them regardless of the cause. This is how Jesus treated the disabled: full of love and acceptance. Satan is the cause of all disease and disability.

Of all those with special needs in the world, the Deaf truly experience the invisible disability. Deafness is one of the most misunderstood of all disabilities. Physically, on the outside, they are no different from others. In fact, most Deaf people don't consider themselves disabled at all. They function very well, just the same as hearing people.

I. King Jordan, former Deaf president of Gallaudet University, said this: "Deaf people can do anything—except hear." Dr. Jordan has accomplished many things as a university president. Currently, Deaf people are successful entrepreneurs, dentists, doctors, scientists,

engineers, truck drivers, teachers, civic leaders, mechanics, carpenters, government employees, actors, etc. They are no different from their hearing counterparts except for the inability to hear.

Unfortunately, despite their abilities and achievements in career and society, Deaf people continue to face job discrimination, social isolation, communication barriers, rejection, and vulnerability. Why? The prevalent means of inter-personal communication is auditory. This places deaf people out of the circle of society. Communication is vital for education, jobs, security, etc.

To compensate for the loss of hearing ability needed for survival, however, Deaf people rely on manual communication—sign language—to communicate with other deaf people. Some Deaf people can hear and speak through hearing aids and speech training. Thanks to the technologies such as mobile phones, computers, online communication, and video phones, Deaf people's lives are improving despite prejudice.

In the past Deaf people suffered much due to the lack of understanding. Interestingly, back around 300 B.C. Aristotle believed that “a person born deaf [was] senseless and incapable to reason.” Also, some religious ministers believed that the Deaf people couldn't be saved based on this text: “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). They took this text literally rather than figuratively. Today Christian churches are more willing to accept the Deaf than ever before, thanks to the grace of God that has helped hearing Christians to be aware of their needs and abilities. There are still, however, some uncomfortable feelings among church members and leaders because of the communication barrier. This barrier and prejudice are probably the main reasons for the lack of supporting services for the Deaf in some churches and the lack of gospel workers in many places in North America.

Let us focus on how Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of man, treated the disabled and the sick. It was Jesus who spoke to Moses to teach Israelites “not [to] insult the deaf or cause the blind to stumble” (Lev. 19:14, NLT). Jesus understood how the disabled suffer by the ways they are treated by others.

In John 5:1-9, Jesus transformed a sick person (probably a paralytic) from rejected to respected in four steps. This is an important lesson for the rest of society to learn in how to deal with the disabled—even the Deaf, who don't consider themselves disabled—enabling them to become free from the imprisonment of discrimination, rejection, and isolation.

- *Rejected Person (John 5:1-7)*. There were many disabled people by the pool. They were there awaiting the moving of the water to be healed by touching it first. Jesus was filled with compassion and pain when He saw the people lying with hope to be healed. There lying on the ground was a man who had been sick for 38 years. He was like others waiting for the chance to be healed. No one was there to help him to get to the pool when the water was stirred. Clearly, he was a rejected person. Nobody was there to help him.

- *Received Person (vv. 6-8)*. This was soon to be changed when Jesus showed His compassion toward this hopeless man. Jesus asked him if he wanted to be well; He communicated with him! Jesus showed that He loved and cared about him. In other words that person with special needs became a received person who was accepted by Jesus despite his disability, illness and the prevalent view of illness. Unfortunately, he didn't know Jesus' intention for Him. That disabled person was not optimistic about getting well in the normal way.

- *Restored Person (vv. 8, 9)*. Jesus had a wonderful plan that would change the man into a restored person. After the invalid's expression of hopelessness, Jesus immediately commanded him to rise, take up his bed and walk (v. 8). Immediately he was healed when he obeyed Jesus. He immediately took His command and walked away with his bed roll.

● *Respected Person* (vv. 8, 9). A restored person became a respected person in society despite the anger of the priests, who criticized him for working on the Sabbath. That restored man was able to function normally as other people did. He became an included part of society. He was now respected because of Jesus' power of love and healing that changed his status.

First, he was a rejected person who was loved by Jesus who accepted him. Then Jesus restored his health, thus gaining respect by the society as if he had never become invalid. We don't know what became of him after this short story, but I believe that he was one of the disciples of Christ who loved Him for what He did for him. Acceptance changes a person's perspective of himself. He might be oppressed by the priests but not by the public who witnessed the transformation of the person. Jesus showed what we call "helping them to help themselves." He improved the person's self-worth, but He also enhanced the person's compassion toward others who suffered from similar cases such as himself.

This story applies to us as the church. It would be well for us to imitate Jesus' method of acceptance and support all individuals, especially the disabled. Despite the improvement in attitude toward them, challenges are still plentiful. Let our church remove the challenges for the disabled to be integrated into the family of God. There is a greater challenge for the Deaf in our church that can be solved through humility of heart and loving efforts in providing the ways to meet their needs.

Ellen G. White wrote: "I saw that it is in the providence of God that widows and orphans, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and persons afflicted in a variety of ways, have been placed in close Christian relationship to His church; it is to prove His people and develop their true character. Angels of God are watching to see how we treat these persons who need our sympathy, love, and disinterested benevolence. This is God's test of our character. If we have the true religion of the Bible we shall feel that a debt of love, kindness, and interest is due to Christ in behalf of His brethren; and we can do no less than to show our gratitude for His immeasurable love to us while we were sinners unworthy of His grace, by having a deep interest and unselfish love for those who are our brethren and who are less fortunate than ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

The story of my wife's challenge as a little girl in Mexico didn't end in hopelessness. Later, in the United States, she became the first in her family to earn multiple college degrees. Her beloved mother, who became an Adventist through Francisca, witnessed her daughter's accomplishment as a successful Deaf person. Her mother realized that God had never forsaken her when Francisca became Deaf. She saw that the works of God had been revealed in and through her. Francisca's mother told her that she was proud of her for bringing blessings to many Deaf people. She realized that her daughter's deafness was a gift because she may not have ever thought of helping the Deaf to know Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us imitate the love of Jesus, who has treated the disabled, especially the Deaf, with acceptance and love. Include them in your circle and learn from them how to effectively minister to them. Learning to communicate with the Deaf is a challenge, but it is not impossible.

Those with special needs are children of God. They are here for a reason. They need your support, and you do need them to help in expanding the gospel to those with special needs. Because of your willingness to provide their needs, those with special needs will be changed—along with you—into perfect people at the second advent of Jesus Christ, who loves each one of us as valuable people.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references in this sermon are from the *New King James Version of the Bible*.

<sup>2</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 511.