



Unbound

Sermon Growth Guide

February 26, 2023
Sickness Unto Death



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John 11:1-4 (ESV)

Key Verse: John 11:4 “But when Jesus heard it he said, ‘This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’”

Big Idea: There is a sickness that leads to death. Sin. We are all subject to it. It binds us and captures us. How can a kept person be made free?

Foundations

This passage—as powerful and theologically deep as it might be—is one that can lead to many questions. Some of you may resonate with Mary and Martha in this story or might have loved ones struggling with sickness. Lazarus is sick. Worried about his condition, Mary and Martha let Jesus know that Lazarus was not doing well and hoped he would help.

Mary and Martha have intimate, personal relationships with Jesus and know how favored Jesus is by God. Mary, as explained in the Scriptures, is the one who anointed Jesus with perfume. Martha is the sister who wanted to host Jesus well, and was anxious, and Lazarus is a good friend of Jesus.

However, Jesus did not seem to be worried about the illness of Lazarus. Instead, he seems to be talking about a different kind of sickness: one that leads to eternal death.

What if Jesus is looking at sickness and death in a different light? What if the sickness Jesus is concerned about is the sickness of sin?

Our bodies are fragile and as we get older, we cannot avoid mortality. But Jesus is concerned about something deeper in us that we, along with Mary and Martha, might not yet understand fully. In this Scripture, Jesus is giving us a glimpse of what it looks like to be healed from this sickness that we call sin. Like Mary and Martha, we may be concerned with dying in the flesh from being frail or from sickness. However, the death that Jesus speaks of is a death that separates you from God forever.

Understanding God’s Word

Together, read John 11:1-4. What do you think Mary and Martha were feeling because their family member was dying?

What kind of sickness is Jesus talking about that leads to death? Why is this event for the glory of God?

Applying God’s Word

We have a sickness that we sometimes don’t want to recognize has us in bondage. This sickness—which is sin—is one that has us captured, and only through Jesus Christ can we be free.

I wonder how Lazarus lived his life after being resurrected. How would you live your life?

Witnessing God’s Word

As we read the story of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, we cannot ignore the interaction between Martha and Jesus. A few verses later in John 11:21-27, she confessed that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, who has come to this world to restore and give eternal life to those who believe in Him.

How do we share such great news to our neighbors? Who in your life is like Lazarus, Mary and Martha that need to be reminded that through Christ you will not taste death, for the sickness has been conquered through Christ?

The Sickness Unto Death. Some of you have heard this story. When Abigail and I married in 1996, I was just getting started in seminary and all my academic juices were flowing. We went on our honeymoon and walked out to find a spot on a warm beach. We settled in on chairs and each pulled out books to read side by side in the sun, basking in the beauty of our surroundings and the joy of our new marriage. I don't remember what Abigail had, but my book was Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*. Abigail looked over at me, gave me an eye, and said, "You are not reading *The Sickness Unto Death* on our honeymoon!" Good call. Good call. I took out my second book; it was by Pope John Paul II. She's a patient woman.

We kick off our walk toward Easter, a season the church calls Lent (as the days lengthen we want to take those extra hours and draw closer to the Lord—that's where the word "Lent" comes from). We will study this one chapter of Scripture, John 11, the story of Lazarus, how he died, how he was buried, and how Jesus called him back to life again. It includes a few redemption stories along the way. It starts with the realization that something is wrong. Lazarus is sick. He has been infected with an illness. He is headed for the grave. "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha" (John 11:1). John assumes we have heard of these people from reading other Gospels. John is the fourth Gospel. Bethany is just over the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem, where Jesus regularly stayed when He came to the city. Mary and Martha are the sisters who got a little crossways with each other in Luke 10 when Martha was working to host Jesus and the disciples as guests, but Mary was seated at Jesus' feet, learning as a disciple of a Rabbi. Mary, as John says, will soon crack open a jar of perfumed ointment and apply it all to Jesus at once, a fragrance that rested on Jesus all the way through His passion, crucifixion and death. That happens in the next chapter of John.

Anyway, these are friends. Jesus ought to be concerned to hear that His friend is sick and near death. You would think

Jesus would come running. But Jesus delayed coming to help. "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was" (John 11:5-6). Huh? Jesus knows more than they know. Jesus always knows more than we know. Back to verse 3: "So the sisters sent to him, saying, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it he said, 'This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it'" (John 11:3-4). Further down, Jesus calls it being asleep. "After saying these things, he said to them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him'" (John 11:11). Since Jesus knew He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, his death was no more permanent than falling asleep. He said the same thing about the daughter of Jairus in Mark 5. Just sleeping. We often fall asleep. Asleep to the things of God. Asleep to the life Jesus brings. Asleep to the prodding of the Holy Spirit. Let's pray that Jesus does not delay when He comes again and again to wake us up.

So, Lazarus lies dead. He died and was buried before Jesus got there. But even death is not the sickness. Jesus says, "This is not the sickness unto death." So, what is? What is the real problem if not death? What is the real sickness if not the fever of Lazarus? Well, Lazarus, even after Jesus called him out of the tomb, Lazarus would die again a natural death. Death is not the real problem. Soren Kierkegaard said, "What good would it have been to Lazarus to be resurrected from the dead if ultimately he had to die anyway—of what good would it have been to Lazarus if He were not He who is the resurrection and the life for everyone who believes in Him!" (*The Sickness Unto Death*) The real problem, the real sickness, Kierkegaard says, is not natural death. Breathing or not breathing, compared with this, is small potatoes. The real problem, for Kierkegaard, is the bottomless, eternal chasm of dark despair opened up by our selfish attempts to define our own existence apart from, and in rebellion against, the love and grace of the God who made us for Himself. That's Kierkegaard. Deep stuff. Great for a

honeymoon. But that's real. The problem, the sickness, is sin and our separation from God.

Jesus didn't come to make us keep breathing forever. Jesus came to save us from our sin, to release us from the bonds of sin; not just to keep us from taking a last breath, but to guarantee that after our last breath we would enter into eternal life with Him and not be cast out into utter despair and damnation. Jesus didn't come to keep us alive, but to ensure that when we die, our death would be like falling asleep. When you fall asleep, the next thing you know (apart from a few interruptions) is waking to the light of morning. When you die, if you trust in Christ, the next thing you know is waking up to His presence in eternal life. What can stop that? What can get in the way of that? Sin. Our sin. Our rebellion and disobedience which has released a mortal infection on the world. There is something wrong in the world and it needs to be fixed. "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:22-23). What does that mean? It means we have all missed the mark. None of us is perfect. None of us is uninfected.

We don't like these terms, I know. It sounds judgmental and harsh. Some of you are here this morning visiting and thinking, "Wow, these First Pres people are dark." If you don't name the problem, you can't find the solution. If you don't isolate the sickness, you can't apply the cure. If you don't accept the diagnosis and prognosis, then you can't begin the treatment. Sin is how the Bible talks about our disobedience and our trespasses against God. Our rebellion. If you resist the term, think of this: do you agree that there is something wrong in the world? Why do you feel that way if you are a natural product of the world as it is? It is because you were wired up for something more. You long for the truth and goodness and beauty of God.

Some say, "Don't judge me according to some ancient irrelevant book; some archaic religious standards of the middle east that I don't even agree with." OK.

How are you doing with your own standards? Francis Schaeffer, years ago, offered this illustration. He said what if you wore a tape recorder around your neck your whole life. Let's update it. What if you had an app that started recording every time you said something judgmental about another person, every time you said what that other person should or should not do? What if, when you died, God said, "OK, I know you don't want to be judged by my standards, so let's use yours," and He played everything recorded on that app. Do you see? You would fail your own standards. There is something wrong. There is a sickness unto death; a sickness more horrible than death. Sin has infected the world.

There is an infection loose in the world. How bad is it? Has it infected me? Yes. You have it, and I have it, and it makes us inclined to do wrong. It blinds you so you can't tell good from evil, right from wrong, and you do what is wrong and you participate in evil. It never stops pushing. Paul talked about this in Romans. We feel the corruption of sin constantly pulling us off course, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Romans 7:19-20). There must be another force at work. We are compelled in disobedient ways. Also, some things we think we choose freely actually bind us up and tie us down. "The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin" (Proverbs 5:22).

How bad is it? Has it infected the people around me? Yes, it has. Those around you are also subject to its influence and more ready to do evil than good. Your relationship with those around you is strained and corrupted. This was made clear when God declared the curse in Genesis 3 after Adam and Eve launched the rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring...To the woman he said, 'I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to

your husband, but he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:15-16). That’s not how God made it; that’s the curse. We live in enmity, natural enemies, one to the other, because each of us is bent toward selfishness, a sickness unto death: “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

How bad is it? Has it infected my job? Does it impact where I work? Yes. Work itself is infected. Some parts of our jobs may bring us joy but work itself has also been twisted. “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). How bad is it? Has it infected the government? I’m not going to answer that. Yes, it has. It impacts and infects all the ways we live together. Work, school, arts, government, policing, warfare, medicine, family, education, media, entertainment, business, even religion. Our institutions are infected. We are more prone to use power to hurt the weak, to favor those who look like us and fall into the traps of racism and favoritism, to put our finger on the scales in a hundred ways to make things turn out better for us and ours. This is why we are committed to social justice, social righteousness, social healing, because there is a social problem. Our institutions are infected with institutional sin.

How bad is it? Has it infected the earth itself? Yes. All creation groans in the pain of disorder, of things not being as they ought to be. “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God...For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Romans 8:19, 22). The natural disasters we witness, like this horrible earthquake in Turkey and Syria (did you know the death toll is over 50,000? We have a giving line open to send help from here if you want to participate at firstprescos.org/givenow), these natural disasters are evidence that there is a sickness unleashed, and it has infected everything. The sickness unto death. Sin. How bad is it? There is

something wrong and it needs to be fixed, and the prescriptions we have been trying are just not working.

If you can’t tell, you have just had the “sin talk.” When I was a youth pastor years ago, a group of us put on a weekend camp for all our kids combined. We arranged the talks in a classic four-part pattern: God, Sin, Cross, Church. In other words, God made you and God loves you. God made you good and made you for good. Sin has infected everything, and “the wages of sin is death.” But God sent his Son Jesus Christ to pay those wages on our behalf on the cross, and now we can have forgiveness and life in Him. “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Now with faith in Christ you have a new life and a new purpose for your life, a life and purpose best lived out with other believers in Christian community, or church. Christians don’t just believe, they belong, and now you are part of the family of God. We gave the God talk on Friday night, the sin talk Saturday morning, the cross talk Saturday night and the church talk on Sunday. You don’t want to leave before you get to the cross, before you get to Jesus. A mother called to let me know she needed to pick up her son for a soccer tournament and would get him Saturday afternoon. Please don’t! I told her the whole pattern and schedule and that he would be leaving having heard that he is infected with sin and darkness and death and all that. She said, “Yeah, but soccer. We need to eat and get a good rest.” I said, “OK, fine, but don’t blame me if he lives the rest of his life thinking God hates him! That’s on you, sister.”

But you have to have the sin talk. As we begin Lent, it’s a good place to start. You have to come to terms with the reality and the weight of sin, otherwise the cross means nothing. You won’t accept the treatment until you fully accept the sickness, the diagnosis and the prognosis. Until you see the true weight of sin, you will never understand the good news. The sinless Son of God died on the cross to save sinners. Jesus took the sickness unto death. How bad is it? It meant the cross.