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Can Jesus Heal Mental Illness?

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The Nature of Mental Illness

One of the questions we get asked a lot in the biblical counseling movement concerns whether Jesus can heal those with a mental illness. The question is asked by people who are concerned about Scripture's sufficiency and Jesus' relevance to deal with the most difficult problems that people face. Before we can answer the question we need to know what we are talking about. That means we need to know what mental illness is.

Defining Mental Illness

Defining mental illness is harder to do than you might imagine. That is because psychologists don't really know what it is. There are scores of books on my shelves full of secularly trained professionals debating what mental illness is and whether

it exists. Interestingly, even the writers of psychology's authoritative manual on mental illness, The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), cannot agree on what constitutes a mental illness.

There has been a lot of attention in the psychology community over the fact that the most recent edition of the manual, DSM-V, made a substantial change to the definition of mental illness included in its previous edition, DSM-IV.

Writing in *Psychology Today*, psychologist Dr. Eric Maisel points out in fascinating language the difficulty of being able to change a definition so easily:

"The very idea that you can radically change the definition of something without anything in the real world changing and with no new increases in knowledge or understanding is remarkable, remarkable until you realize that the thing being defined does not exist. It is completely easy—effortless, really—to change the definition of something that does not exist to suit your current purposes. In fact, there is hardly any better proof of the non-

existence of a non-existing thing than that you can define it one way today, another way tomorrow, and a third way on Sunday.”

The definition of mental illness can be changed so easily because mental illness does not really exist.

So, What is Mental Illness?

Mental illness is not a disease in the way that tuberculosis or hepatitis is. Mental illness is more in the realm of what social scientists call a construct. A construct is not an object like a tractor or table. It is an idea like beauty or relevance. A construct is a relatively abstract idea that gets informed by the shifting opinions of various people. Mental illness is a construct. Psychologists Herb Kutchins and Stuart Kirk have each served on the DSM committees, whose votes decide what is and is not a mental illness. They say,

“The category of [mental illness] itself is an invention, a creation. It may be a good and useful invention, or it may be a confusing one. DSM is a compendium of constructs. And like a large and popular mutual fund, DSM’s holdings are constantly changing as the managers’ estimates and beliefs about the value of those holdings change.”

Mental illness is not really a thing. It is a shifting idea that different people fill up with different categories at different times. For the most part it is a category that gets used by secular psychologists to

describe behaviors that are outside the range of normal. I have described elsewhere that, for Christians, our standard is not normalcy, but righteousness.

Mental Illness and Worldview

Before we can answer whether Jesus can heal mental illness, we need to be sure we know what we are talking about. Understanding that mental illness is a construct means that Believers have a responsibility to fill up that category with their biblical worldview, rather than a secular one.

Psychology informs the construct of mental illness with a secular, materialistic worldview. They do not believe that people are spiritual beings who live all of their life under the authority of a God who made them and holds them accountable. Denying the Divine and the spiritual requires them to see all problems as physical and organic in nature. Worry isn’t sinful; it is an organic mental illness that requires medical intervention. Sorrow isn’t spiritual; it is a medical problem that requires a pharmacological solution.

As Christians we know better.

Jesus teaches that these problems—and thousands more like them—are spiritual problems that grow out of the heart of man (Mark 7:14-23). Certainly they impact the body, and the body can have its own problems as well. But the assigning of

spiritual problems like anger, worry, and sorrow to the medical realm is unbiblical, unchristian, and a rejection of the clear statements of Jesus about the problems people have.

Mental Illness and Jesus

Mental illness is a label secular thinkers assign to spiritual problems discussed in the Scriptures. Christians ought to understand mental illness in terms of spiritual issues. If mental illnesses are spiritual issues then we need to ask whether Jesus can bring healing to these things.

The Bible, Healing, and Spiritual Issues

The question is important because we often think of healing with respect to physical issues like a broken bone or Lou Gehrig's disease. On the other hand, the Bible does not limit healing to physical issues. Scripture talks about healing with respect to spiritual matters as well.

The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. (Psalm 147:2-3)

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Proverbs 12:18)

Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts,

and turn and be healed. (Isaiah 6:10)

These are a few examples. There are many more (Pss 30:1-3, 107:19-20; Prov 13:17, 29:1; Isa 53:5, 57:18; Jer 15:18; Hos 6:1—and more!). God is actually rather fond of using healing language in a poetic way to refer to God's restoration of our sins and sufferings.

Healing Language in a Mental Illness Culture

On the authority of Scripture Believers can talk about Jesus healing spiritual issues that our culture often calls mental illness. But this makes some people nervous. They think if we use the language of healing for mental illnesses we give credence to a secular view that sees spiritual problems as physical in nature.

I understand that concern, and actually share it. In fact, I used to avoid the language of healing with regard to spiritual issues for the same reason. Then I grew in my understanding of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. The authority and sufficiency of Scripture means that we must not allow secular psychology to have the role of determining how we speak about the counseling problems people face or their solutions. God gets to decide how we refer to the issues people face in their lives, not psychology. If we refuse ever to use the language of healing for spiritual matters, we're guilty of the same kind of rejection of the sufficiency of Scripture as those

who insist on referring to teenage rebellion as obstinate defiant disorder. Neither person is using God’s language to describe problems and solutions.

Healing in Christ Alone

When it comes to mental illness the professionals disagree on a definition, and most laypeople really have no idea what they’re talking about. If Christians are going to use the language to engage unbelievers and uninformed Christians in a conversation, we need to carefully explain that mental illness is atheistic language for problems that have to do with life lived before the God of heaven and earth. We need to further explain that it is Jesus alone who can deal with these problems.

Jesus really can heal these problems. In fact, His is the only healing available. Our culture believes that mental illnesses point to biology and require medical intervention. Those of us in the biblical counseling movement are the only ones who know that the construct of mental illness actually has to do with problems of the heart and require the gospel of God’s grace for healing.

It is we biblical counselors who understand that secular psychology heals the wounds of God’s people lightly (Jeremiah 6:14). In a culture of mental illness we must be the people who point to Jesus who bore our sins in His body on

the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2:24).

FUNNIES

Dad on the last day of school: So, where’s your school report, my boy?

Tom: Sorry, I’ll bring it a day later.

Dad: Why?

Tom: I let Kevin borrow it because he wanted to scare his parents.

A recent scientific study showed that out of 2,293,618,367 people, 94% are too lazy to actually read that number.

I asked my daughter if she’d seen my newspaper. She told me that newspapers are old school. She said that people use tablets nowadays and handed me her iPad.

The fly didn’t stand a chance.

A man got hit hard in the head with a can of 7Up. He’s alright though, it was a soft drink.

Q. Why do the French like to eat snails so much?

A. They can’t stand fast food.