

Boost Your Spiritual Wellness!

A sermon based on Proverbs 4:20-22.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I recently read a 2015 poll from the Kaiser Family Foundation, which provides a lot of in-depth on key health issues. They did a poll on yearly physicals. Here's what they found: 92% of Americans think annual physicals are important. 62% reported actually getting the exam. But another study from a few years prior suggested that only about 44 million people get the exam every year...less than 15%.

Are you one of the 15%? How serious do you take your health? For many of us, health is probably the number one things we tend to worry about, whether it's our health or kids' health, if we have them. Averaged out, over \$10,000 is spent on healthcare per person per year. I saw some statistics which said \$10 billion is spent each year on yearly check-ups, more than we spend as a society on breast cancer care. So, yeah, good health is important. We want...we need good healthcare.

We need spiritual healthcare as well. In other words, we need to be growing in our faith in Jesus, and there's only one way that happens. Do you know how? It's through God's Word. It's being at worship. It's reading your Bible on your own. It's studying Scripture...in personal Bible study...in family devotions...in group classes. Our verses today describe the words of Scripture as ***"life to those who find them...health to one's whole body."*** The easiest healthcare plan there is. Have Jesus, be in his Word, and your faith in him will continue to grow stronger and healthier.

So then, the opposite is true as well, right? Stay away from Jesus or deprioritize his Word, and what can happen? The Bible provides a number of instances of what happens to people when their faith in Jesus isn't growing. Paul talks about how someone "shipwrecked" their faith...a violent and tragic and potentially deadly downturn in their spiritual health.

So, what does your current spiritual healthcare plan look like?

I have some more statistics to share with you, from the 2016 WELS statistical report. I'm guessing we would have close to, if not, 100% of WELSers saying their spiritual health is extremely important to them. Would that be an accurate assessment?

As a synod, however, 42% of the baptized members are in weekly worship, with 19% doing Sunday morning Bible class or Sunday School. In our Pacific Northwest district, those numbers are faring a little better, with 50% of baptized members in weekly worship, with 29% in Sunday morning Bible class or Sunday School. As a congregation, our numbers are about 58% in weekly worship, with 35% in Sunday morning Bible class or Sunday School.

How important is your spiritual healthcare to you? How seriously are you taking your health? As a congregation, we have the best set of numbers there when it comes to weekly worship attendance and Sunday School attendance, but, if we were evaluating this as a teacher, you know what our grade would be, right? We'd be failing.

How important is your spiritual health to you? I know, those numbers are maybe a little misleading. They don't take into account what you might be doing at home, or confirmation classes, or Women's or Men's Bible studies, but I don't know if that would bump up any of the percentages that significantly.

Why the discrepancy? Why such a huge gap between those saying spiritual healthcare is important and those who are actually doing something about it?

Think about your physical healthcare. I don't need to see a show of hands, but do you do the yearly physical? I'm thinking as you get older, you probably do. I don't. Annual physicals are covered under most insurance plans, but I only go every 2-3 years. And I know I'm not alone. Why is that? Is it a guy thing? A "I'm young and indestructible right now" mentality?

It's because I think I'm fine. It's because I think I'm healthy. And, the healthy don't see the doctor. They're there for the sick.

Is that the mindset when it comes to God's Word and taking care of your spiritual health and growing in your faith in Jesus? "I'm strong in my faith and indestructible right now. There's no temptation out there that I don't feel equipped and confident that I can handle. "I'm at a good place, spiritually speaking. I'm more mature in my faith. Kids need to be in Sunday School – that's important – but any of these Bible classes, not all that necessary."

My guess is, just as we often don't concern ourselves with our health until we know something's wrong (or at least that's how I function), we treat our spiritual healthcare the same way. A lot of people I've counselled over the years were just like that – by the time I got to talk to them, by the time they finally wanted God's Word to speak to them, the hole they had dug was already way too deep.

What's your excuse? You don't see the need or the benefits? I haven't puffed up the importance of worship and Bible Class as much as I should? 9:15am too early on Sunday? 8:00am on Saturday even earlier? 6:00pm on a weeknight too late? The content may not always be to your interests? You don't find it inspiring? Or you're really just not all that concerned about your spiritual health or what God wants there?

You know, I feel like I share a lot of my faults with you, but here's another one because I know I'm not alone. My worst doctor's visit was the first dentist appointment I had up here. And it wasn't because I had cavities or because they told me I had to get a lot of dental work done or because, the dentist in general, not people's favorite place to do. No, I got so nervous for my appointment because I was embarrassed at how long it had been since I had last gotten a check-up...I think four or five years. I was embarrassed at how long I had taken such poor care of my teeth...I figured I was going to get yelled at.

Friends, it's embarrassing, when I think about it, the time I will commit to almost anything else, but the first thing to get cut from my life, when I'm running late or there's just not enough time for everything I want to do....it's God's Word.

It's embarrassing how, when I asked my Seminary professor, "Why shouldn't we expect and work toward 100% attendance and Bible class participation?" he almost laughed as he said it was more of a pipe dream than being realistic.

It's embarrassing how we, as a whole – as a synod, as a district, even as a congregation – can talk about the importance of God's Word and how it's so important to our spiritual health, but then be failing when

it comes to spiritual healthcare...and to be risking something so precious and important as our faith in Jesus.

If you're with me, pay attention...listen closely to the words of the Great Physician. He doesn't yell at us for our delinquency. He doesn't even scold us for the way we've treated his Word. No, listen, ***"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to all the righteous, but sinners."***

We can all agree we're sinners. We need better spiritual healthcare. We need a doctor. We need Jesus.

What a blessing, then, that Jesus considers you sick. Because he's got the only treatment that works...his Word. Jesus chooses to spend time with you, to reach out to you through his Word, to heal you.

His message is always the same, but it's proven to work. Have you ever had those hard days when you didn't know where else to turn, so you opened up your Bible or looked up a devotion, and what you read was perfect for your situation...it was just what you needed to hear? I've had people come up to me after a sermon and say, "Pastor, I felt like you wrote that sermon for me; it talked about exactly what I'm going through." That's no coincidence. God's Word works.

God's Word has this healing feature, and not just for our day to day problems. God's Word has this healing feature for our sin problem. You see, we're not the first people to not give God's Word and our spiritual health the treatment it deserves. The Bible provides numerous cases for us, and what was the remedy every time? God's grace.

Every time the people forgot God, God reminded them who he was and what he had done for them. Friends, this is who God is and what he's done for you...from his Word: ***"God is love...This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."***

That's God's simple remedy for our sin problem...love in Jesus, who lived and died and rose for us. Jesus, who gave his perfect life as the atoning, reconciling sacrifice that took away our sins, but then took up his life again to complete our salvation. It's all in the "Good Book." It's all throughout the "Good Book." And because of that message and, really, the object of that message – Jesus and his work for us, we are healed.

And now, as Proverbs reminds us, ***"Do not let [those words] out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to one's whole body."*** It's like what Jesus' disciples said in our gospel a couple of weeks ago, "Jesus, where else would we go? ***You have the words of eternal life."***

You know, one of my biggest frustrations with going to the doctor is I go to the walk-in clinic or a schedule a check-up, I have to wait at least an hour to see the doctor, he/she sees me for five minutes, maybe only even talks to me, and I get billed for \$300. To me, it doesn't feel worth it.

These are the words of eternal life. These are the words that tell you of your salvation. These are the words that bring spiritual health, as Martin Luther reminds us in his explanation to the 3rd Article of the Apostles' Creed, ***"The Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."*** These are the words God uses to keep us spiritually strong, as the Bible tells us, ***"I pray that out of his glorious riches [God] may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being (your faith)."***

God's Word works. It gives us the boosters our spiritual health needs. And it's painless! In fact, the Bible tells us God's Word is ***"sweet...to my mouth, sweeter than honey to my taste."***

So how can we get more serious about God's Word and our spiritual health? Well, there's no need to struggle your way through any healthcare marketplaces. How's this for a simple healthcare plan? We need more Jesus. We need more of God's Word.

As some of you know, I grew up in the WELS bubble, meaning I went to WELS schools from Pre-K through the Seminary. In grade school, at my dad's church, it would often happen that most parents who were sending their kids to the Lutheran day school wouldn't have their kids going to Sunday School. My siblings and I still did. Back then, I thought it was because we're pastor's kids, and that's what we were supposed to do. Now, I realize it was because I needed it.

We can't ever have enough of God's Word. This is a treatment we will always have a need for more. And I really hope and pray you don't wait to see that until it's too late.

I'll admit, that's one of the advantages of yearly physicals. They're all about the preventative maintenance. In some cases, they can detect problems early on that could ultimately save lives. Right? If someone has a stroke caused by a blockage, that could well have been prevented had they had a check up and were found to have high cholesterol and had been taking the proper medications. High blood pressure is another killer that can be easily remedied with drugs such as ACE inhibitors that if left untreated can cause heart attack and stroke.

A Bible falling apart belongs to someone who isn't. I'm sure I've shared that with you before. Have a Bible that's being regularly used, making use of the Christian education opportunities presented here, it builds up your faith in Jesus and works to prevent against the deadly diseases of temptation and sin. That's a win in my book.

How about thinking about it this way...how long will you continue to take a medicine or antibiotic? Can you think of your spiritual health like that? Jesus has destroyed the power of sin in my life and yours. He's paid the ultimate price of hell for it. But sin still lurks, we still give in, so the infection's still there.

God's Word is still the only viable remedy. Sometimes, I hate to hear the bad news, but I still need to hear it. And then what follows is the soothing balm of the gospel. And what's left is the Great Physician's recovery plan.

It's wellness check-ups, or being at worship often. It's spiritual boosters, provided in devotions and Bible reading and Bible studies. That's important...we can all agree on that. Now, we get to follow through and get that boost for our spiritual wellness – God's Word, for there, we find life and health. Amen.