

Funeral: Jim Kirkpatrick

1 Corinthians 15:20-26,35-38,42-44,53-58

Psalm 100

Revelation 21:2-7

John 14:1-6

“But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. But when this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’” (1 Corinthians 15:35-36,54-55)

Today you and I have come together from destinations near and far to remember and celebrate the life and ministry of Dr. James Francis Kirkpatrick, a physician, a surgeon, a husband, a father, a benefactor, a friend, but—most of all—a beloved child of the living God.

While I usually encourage people not to be overly sad at funerals, I confess that I myself am a bit sad today—perhaps “disappointed” is more the word—because unlike so many of you, I wasn’t one of the ones fortunate enough to know Jim personally. And it sure sounds like he was a man worth knowing. Even so, I have listened to and have loved your stories over the past several days, and if there’s anything I know for sure about Jim Kirkpatrick, it’s this: Jim may have known and understood the great mysteries of the human body, but more than that, Jim Kirkpatrick knew and understood the great mysteries of the human *soul*.

Obviously, one can’t begin to describe Jim without speaking of his extraordinary medical career. My guess is that his career is the very thing that connected so many of you to him. Perhaps you were one of his colleagues: a doctor, surgeon, nurse, or staff member who worked alongside him. Some of you were surely patients of his; perhaps some of you owe your very life to Jim’s practice and skill.

As all of you know, Jim was a longtime surgeon here in Tifton and a well beloved doctor. After he completed his medical residency at Emory Hospital, he came here and was instrumental in the founding of the Tifton Surgical Clinic, and he was the first board-certified surgeon in all of Tift County. His good friend and colleague of many years, internist Dr. Joe Turner, says they had the big idea of going into practice together—the surgeon and the internist—which meant they could take care of just about anything their patients might need in a small town practice.

When they chose Tifton to open their practice, there were only about 12 doctors here. They bought a brick house on 12th Street and fixed it up as a medical office. They were busy from the start, made rounds twice a day, and traveled to the small hospitals in Ocilla and Adel, offering to transfer them to Tifton for more specialized care when needed. And the method of payment was never the first question asked when a patient needed treatment. (Imagine that!)

Dr. Turner talks about how nice it was to have had each other's backs. If Joe, who was practicing internal medicine with special skills in cardiology, found a problem and needed a surgical opinion, it was right down the hall—no referral with weeks of waiting to see a surgeon. And that worked both ways. Once when Jim was out of town and Joe was faced with treating a life-threatening respiratory failure in a patient who needed a tracheotomy, Jim talked him through it by telephone. It was successful, and the patient went on to lead a productive and full life.

Jim was an “old time doctor,” caring, concerned, respectful of his patients and their fears. Handsome with early gray, warm and personable, kind and humble. Jim could be shy at times, but he had a good sense of humor, and an occasional quick temper—though typically directed at the hospital for something done or left undone for one of his patients! Though he was not one to be self-promoting, his physician colleagues had high regard for him. Jim had excellent surgical judgment—careful and cautious, always asking for another opinion if he was unsure of the best course of treatment for a patient. Joe remembers seeing Jim sitting at his desk in the almost dark, calling patients late into the evenings. Jim inspired confidence in his patients, and more than one physician has said he would have chosen him as a personal surgeon for himself or his family, had the need arisen.

Yet while Jim exemplified old fashioned values in his practice, he kept up with the fast pace of medical advancement. Shortly after arriving in Tift County, Jim found that there was no respirator in the hospital, so he got in his car, went to Atlanta, bought one, brought it back to Tifton, and set it up. Joe had a similar experience of claiming a demo defibrillator abandoned in the basement of Grady hospital, hauling it to Tifton, and using it on a patient the first day they set it up. The patient in question lived for many years after this technological debut. When Joe created a demand for permanent pacemakers, Jim went up to Emory and learned to put them in. (You can almost imagine these two burning up the highways together, medical missionaries who brought an extraordinary new level of medical and surgical care to the people of our county.)

And so, it is plainly obvious how dedicated this fine surgeon was, and how well he understood the intricacies of the human body. But as I said before, that's not all Jim Kirkpatrick knew. More important than the body, he also understood the soul.

According to his daughter Melissa: “He was the opposite of self-serving. The antonym of arrogance. He wasn't entitled. And he was always in awe and appreciative of his many blessings. How did this translate to his children? What did I see?

- In his humble manner, he deferred to others often, letting them be heard and seen, rather than himself.
- Ever grateful, he prayed to God daily for his many blessings, and prayed for others more often than that. For the tough prayers, he had a God Can. He would write his prayers down and put them in the can for special attention.

- He didn't require others' praise and would be quick to point out what feat they had mastered better than himself.
- He said "Thank you" and "I'm sorry" more than anyone I know, and for reasons far beyond things in his control.
- He would feel great gratitude for other people's kindness in the world, and offer thanks that there are such people that do good deeds.
- He would feel deep sorrow for other people's loss in the world, and pray for their healing."

Melissa tells an amazing story that captures so many of these qualities in her father. "He was a benevolent, kind, and generous man," she says, "always worrying about others' troubles before his own. Once when he was visiting me after I moved to Los Angeles, we passed a homeless man on the end of an off-ramp holding a sign that said, 'Will work for food.' Cynically, I commented that so many of these homeless people were scam artists, and I didn't want to indulge their addictions by giving them money.

"My father was quiet for a bit, then said, 'That was the wrong decision, Melissa. You never know what someone has been through and the horrible things have happened to that person that have resulted in him standing on a street corner with no dignity left, asking for anything to get him over to the next day.' He continued, 'Your concern over what he spends the money on isn't important. What's important is whether or not you choose to help him.' To drive his point home he told me a story about a man from Tifton. A friend of his, a successful man, whom I remembered. But over the years, the difficulties of life had gotten the better of this man. He lost his family, his health, his job. And one day, as my dad was walking down a street in Atlanta, he came right up on a homeless man: his friend who had mortgaged his whole livelihood and lost it all. They spoke briefly. My dad gave him money from his wallet, but the friend didn't want to accept it. He was just appreciative of my dad recognizing him and stopping to speak.

"So," my Dad ended his story, "you never EVER know what a man has had to endure that is so awful that he ends up without a home on a street, asking for money."

Jim Kirkpatrick understood the human body, but he also understood the human soul.

And his understanding only got stronger as he got older. One of his other daughters Heather wrote, "Just over a month ago, Daddy was hospitalized for collapsing in our home and enduring head trauma. When it was time to be discharged from the hospital, he was weak, so we helped him get dressed. All of the sudden, he walked over to the other patient that had shared the hospital room with him. I tried to stop him, fearing he would fall, but he was adamant that he wanted to speak to the other man. He walked to the man's bedside and said, 'I'm so sorry. I wanted to help you last night but they wouldn't let me.' I was overwhelmed with the love and genuine care with which our father spoke to the patient, when HE was a patient, too. It made me smile because I felt it was such a clear example of the person he was ... always placing others before himself."

Jim Kirkpatrick understood the human body, but he also understood the human soul.

In closing, I want to share with you a list of some of the most important things Melissa says she learned from her father. These are fantastic life lessons, perfect for all of us who, like Jim, wish to have a deep and abiding understanding and respect for the human soul:

- Be thankful to God for your existence.
- Show him how appreciative you are by using the gifts he gave you.
- Be kind to everyone you meet, as much as you are able for as long as you are able.
- Be generous and charitable, both in time and in money if you are able, for to whom much is given much is required.
- Be good to animals. They are a gift from God.
- Be good to the earth we live in; we only have one. Appreciate and look for its beauty in every part of nature, and be in awe of it.
- Be good to your body; you only have one of those, too.
- Don't be ignorant. God gave you a brain. Use it. Educate yourself, then help whoever you can with the information you have learned.
- Be forgiving. Some people are just a product of their circumstances. Understand that. Don't blame them, and don't blame yourself.
- And most of all ... simply have compassion.

“But someone will ask,” says the Apostle Paul, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. But when this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’”

I'm sure that to most doctors, most surgeons, most who understand the great mysteries of the human body, it would appear that death is the final chapter, the end of all. But Jim knew better. Jim didn't just understand the body; he understood the soul. As a surgeon, as a Christian, as a child of God, Jim knew that when we meet death, life is not ended. It is simply changed.

So today, you and I join together in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and in our fond memories of this great man, and we declare, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” And with Jim and all the saints of God, we make our song, “Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.”

Amen.