



# SECTION 1

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INTRODUCTION  
TO THE 5 STAGES

# Disabled and Not Disabled

I don't remember being picked on as a student at Orange City Christian School in Northwest Iowa. That's maybe the thing that stands out most for me considering I do have a funny-sounding voice. I would expect that more people would have picked on me.

In fact, not only did they not pick on me, they actively prevented picking on me. Everyone did. Even the boy who was tall, confident, and athletic.

We had nothing in common.

Except for *Star Wars*. He loved it, and so did I. We talked about it, talked about and played with our favorite action figures (not dolls), and he reveled in sharing news about the upcoming movies with me.

## I am Disabled

One time, I was over at his house and I don't even remember what we were doing, but his neighbor friend came over to play. Not very self-aware, I said hi and we talked about what we could play. This other boy asked my friend why I talked funny.

I remember that.

I remember how it felt. I remember looking down at my playing hands and realizing something was wrong with me. My parents had told me before, but I never really heard it in my own voice. Even today, to my own ears, I sound perfectly normal, unless I really work to listen and hear the weird noises that come out.

But I also remember my friend almost spitting back at this boy, "He doesn't talk funny." I remember my friend's mom coming out on the stoop to sternly talk to this boy for saying that. I remember feeling a little bad for the boy, but feeling very good about me.

I remember that as the first time I got picked on. I remember how my friend and his mom didn't even hesitate to stand up for me and be my friends. My real friends. And I remember it as the first time I asked why God did this to me.

## I am not Disabled

My friend and his mom would not allow this young boy to make me feel different, to make me feel lesser, because of my disability.

In fact, my parents and friends had done much to make sure my expectations in life were in no way diminished by the reality of disability, sometimes even unintentionally.

Because they saw me as “normal,” I mostly saw myself as normal too. That’s why I, like many others, have been so uncomfortable around people who have disabilities. I didn’t see how they fit into my world, nor why they should be part of it.

When I was little, my mom worked as a nurse at a place called Hope Haven, in Northwest Iowa. Hope Haven was home to many adults with disabilities, and I felt very uncomfortable on the one occasion that I remember visiting her workplace.

On a school field trip to nearby Sioux Falls, we visited a “school for the deaf,” and enjoyed a dramatic performance by some of their students, but I once again didn’t want to be around this place.

I did not like people with disabilities.

I talked about it one time with my mom, telling her how uncomfortable those people made me feel.

“Well, just remember,” she cajoled. “You are disabled too, you know.”

Okay, Fine. I am disabled.

The words stung, even when I was barely a teenager. You are disabled. I remember thinking even then that I had a bad

attitude toward people who had disabilities, and feeling doubly bad because I was one myself.

My mom was just reminding me of the importance of our disability attitudes. Our attitudes toward people who have disabilities says a lot about how we view God, and what we believe He sees in us. Our disability attitudes aren't just a disability issue. They are a discipleship issue.

If we believe in the God that is proclaimed in the Bible, we will accept that our attitudes toward people with disabilities must change. The next several chapters will assist you in doing just that. So stick with me, because we're just getting started.

## Questions to Consider

When have you been made to feel like you were different or didn't fit in? Are differences important, and why? What does the Bible teach us about our differences?

## Why *The 5 Stages* Exists

I am disabled in that I have a pretty obvious speech impediment. But I am not disabled in the way that most people think of someone with disabilities. I can do most anything that a “normal” person can do; my mind works pretty much the standard way. So, I guess you could say I am not really disabled.

I see myself that way too, in my everyday moments anyway. I don't generally look at myself and think, “I'm disabled.” Then again, does anybody who's disabled do that?

Because I don't see myself as disabled, I have always had a hard time identifying with people who have disabilities. I think most of that comes from not wanting to see myself that way even when I'm facing that reality head on.

## Staring Disability in the Face

A few years ago, I was at a big concert venue where we were promoting Elim and our programs, and we were a long ways from home. I was there with two other Elim staff members, two Elim adult clients, Stacey and Christina, and a good friend from Food for the Hungry.

We were all exhausted at the end of the day, so we ducked into the air-conditioned steakhouse a few blocks from our hotel to get some food. When our waitress got to the table, her bubbly personality made us all smile. She asked us all our names, and when Stacey and Christina spoke she noticed they had some impairments, so her tone of voice changed. Her voice went a little higher, her head cocked to the side a little bit, and she spoke even more kindly—if a little condescendingly—to my friends from Elim.

I thought that was great. She was trying so hard to engage them and speak to them. She was such a nice young lady.

Until she turned to me. When I said hi, she noticed my speech impediment. Right away she noticed. And I've tried to hide it before, so I can tell when I've fooled someone into thinking I don't have a speech impediment. I didn't fool her.

And then—from my perspective, at least—she went from being a kind and sweet young lady to an awful, rude, ignorant person,

all because she started talking to and treating me the same way she treated Christina and Stacey. How terribly rude.

## But I'm not as Disabled as Them

It bothered me until I got back to my hotel room that night.

I didn't really understand what it was that bothered me. I called my wife to tell her about it, and talk it through. This event had troubled me, and I couldn't put my finger on the problem.

Finally, it clicked. I realized that what upset me was not that I was treated in such a way, but that I had no problem with that nice young lady's attitude until it was directed at me.

## But that Doesn't Make Me More Valuable

Why was it okay for her to talk down to my friends, but not to me? What made me more 'worthy' of simple common courtesy and respect?

More than that, I thought about how our adults and kids get treated at Elim. I knew our teachers, support staff, instructors and supervisors never were condescending, no matter how disabled a student or adult was. In fact, if anything, our team was almost "mean" by comparison, always keeping high expectations of the students, calling out inappropriate behaviors in adults, holding each other to account in a way



that said, “As a child of God, you are expected to act, talk, and work in a certain way. I am not lowering my expectations of you just because you are having a bad day or because you have this or that disability. I respect you too much to condescend to you.”

My co-workers at Elim had always acted this way, and I had learned some of that behavior from them, but this was all new to me.

It was that night that I started to map out *The 5 Stages* of disability attitudes. And in the next chapter in this series, I’ll share the biblical foundations that form the foundation of *The 5 Stages*.

## Questions to Consider

In the meantime, can you share a time when you felt like you were unfairly judged as ‘lacking’ in some way? How did that make you feel? What is a God-honoring way of looking at people with disabilities?

# The Foundations of *The 5 Stages*

The 5 Stages exist to convince you, and to enable you to convince others, that life lived alongside people who have disabilities is not optional. It is essential to our lives as followers of Christ.

But these arguments do not exist for their own purposes. They exist because they are supported by a strong, biblical foundation. These foundations include:

- **Disability is not a blessing and it is also not a curse.** People made in the image of their Creator are blessings, disabilities are not. Yet a disability is also not a curse. Jesus tells us this very directly in John 9. The disciple asked Jesus why a man was born blind, assuming it was due to some kind of sin. Jesus tells them simply that neither this man nor his parents sinned. It's not a curse. Yet we also know, from living life with a disability,

that it is not a blessing. It is not always easy; and it rarely makes one's life more enjoyable than it would be without the disability.

- **We are all disabled and we are also not all disabled.** We are all broken, and all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3). So yes, we all have disabilities and shortcomings. But your slight case of inattentiveness is not the same as my complete blindness or crippling mental illness. Your predilections and sinful desires are an impediment to living a life that glorifies God, but it is not the same as my inability to walk or to feed myself. More notably, you saying that we are the same is often just an effort to absolve yourself of any obligation to come to my aid, to put yourself out on my behalf. We may all have some special area of disability, but some of us need extra help, and that's just a reality of life.
- **Our value does not come from accomplishment or from being disabled, but only from God.** Our value is not based on extrinsic value systems that celebrate accomplishments like graduation, athletic prowess, or employability. Neither does our value come from intrinsic qualities like those that make us 'unique.' Rather, the sum total of our value is defined and seen only in relation to our Creator. (See Matthew 10:31, Romans 5:8, and many other verses to understand our value in God's sight.)

- **God made me, but I don't know that He made me this way.** We have record of God doing things to harden people's hearts, to make them lame, but we also know He is our God who uses terrible things and situations to redeem His world and accomplish His purposes. He only does good. Saying He made me this way can easily lead to concluding that everything about being disabled is just fine. When it isn't. We know that God makes us each to be who we are (Psalm 139), but I just can't say for sure that He makes us *the way we are*. So, did God create me? Yes. Did he intend my disability, or did He just allow it? I don't know.

Each of these foundations is important to confront and accept in order to really grasp the meaning of each of *The 5 Stages*. Disability is a part of life, and people who have disabilities are His children, the same as you. Each person is a masterpiece of their Creator, created to do the good works that were prepared in advance for each one to do.

## Questions to Consider

What do you think? Are people with disabilities more important, more loving, and more godly than people who do not have disabilities? What has drawn you into a relationship with someone who is disabled?

# the 5 stages

## changing attitudes

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### STAGE 1: IGNORANCE

Weaknesses and disabilities are a sign that God either does not care or is not able to fix the situation. In fact, they may be a result of sin or a lack of faith. God is not involved in the life of someone with a disability, because He can't use people who are so broken. I do not know people with disabilities, nor do I know anything about disabilities. I have no interest in getting to know them or to know more about their life.

### STAGE 2: PITY

I feel sorry for people with disabilities. It's too bad, really. I am blessed by God and I can help others. I am grateful that my children are not disabled. People with weaknesses and disabilities obviously need someone like me to help them and give them meaning, due to their troubles. I really don't see any meaning or purpose to their lives.

### STAGE 3: CARE

Like me, people with disabilities were created in God's image. By that virtue alone they have value. I hope that someone will take the time to show them God's love, and I will happily support such an effort. In fact, I think we need to find ways to help those people. Maybe we should start a special church education class, or respite care for the sake of the parents.

### STAGE 4: FRIENDSHIP

I have come to know and spend time with a friend who has a disability. This person has value in God's sight, but also in mine, and I know that my life is better for having known this person, and as much as I have helped her, she has also blessed me. In fact, I now like to initiate relationships with people who have disabilities. God brings many different people into my church and community, including people with disabilities, and we all benefit as we grow in friendship with each other.

### STAGE 5: CO-LABORERS

If God has called each of us to serve and praise Him with every fiber of our beings, then He has done the same for our brothers and sisters in Christ with disabilities. I think ministry should not just be to people with disabilities, but with or alongside people who have disabilities. Together, we will encourage and equip each other, with and without disabilities, into every good work to respond to God's call on our lives. We can all give and we can all receive.

**AWARENESS**

**ACCESS**

**INTEGRATION**

**ENGAGEMENT**



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DAN VANDER PLAATS  
WITH THANKS TO ELIM CHRISTIAN SERVICES, DISABILITY CONCERNS CRC,  
DISABILITY CONCERNS RCA, JONI AND FRIENDS, AND MANY OTHERS

*I've been bullied my whole entire life.*

*When I was three years old, I was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, and then by five years old I had nine ear infections. I couldn't hear. My mom and my dad and my sister thought that I was going to be deaf, that I had to go to the doctor and get tubes in my ears.*

*People would tease me, and make fun of me, and tell me that I'm retarded. When they told me that I'm retarded, it made me feel like: I could do anything. But they don't think I could do anything, but people still tease me but not as much they did when I was going through it when I was in school.*

*They don't understand what I go through. They've never been there before. They don't know what I have gone through when I was growing up, and when people teased me when I was growing up.*

*It just hurt.*

*They would call me "four-eyes," or they would say that I'm ugly, or that I'm not cute.*

*I am the same person as everybody else, but everybody else doesn't see it that way. I am a person just like you. I have a disability.*

*But they don't understand that, so then I have to explain it to them.*

*I don't feel that ignorance any more.*

*Stacey,*

*Co-laborer*

*Elim Christian Services*