

The Inconvenience Of Needy People

Series on Acts

Acts Chapter 3 begins with the story of a crippled man, begging outside the temple courts in Jerusalem, who through the power of Jesus, was wonderfully healed. People were used to seeing miracles like this when Jesus was around, but when this took place, Jesus had ascended back to heaven. Now the disciples of Jesus were doing the same things he did. Since he ascended, all sorts of supernatural things had begun to happen. On the day of Pentecost, tongues of fire on their rested on the heads of the believers. People were speaking in other tongues. 3000 people decided to follow Jesus on the same day. The whole of Jerusalem was talking about what was going on with these followers of Jesus. And at the centre of all this were Peter and John. They were the emerging leaders of this new movement. Things seemed to happen around them, so wherever they went, people followed to see what would happen. Here's how Luke describes this miracle.

"One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer – at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. While the beggar held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see". (Acts 3:1 – 16 NIV)

Picture this scene. Peter and John are on their way to a prayer meeting. But right in their path is a disabled man who can't walk, and wants money. As I read this story, my mind starts to imagine what might happen if we were on our way to church, and we got confronted by this man. Let me take a guess at some of the thoughts that might go through our minds.

- **“Why do these beggars have to hang around church?”**

We know the answer to that. It’s where the people are, and it’s pretty hard as a follower of Jesus to go to a place of prayer, where you pray for the needs of the world, and then walk right past a man holding out his money cup. We don’t have this problem so much in Westlake, but the churches in Geneva face this every Sunday, right on the church steps. Beggars are brought in by the busload to beg from Christians coming out of church. It’s a real problem for those who go to Geneva churches, especially when they know that the money they give to those who beg is taken off them by a minder. How do you feel about people who beg? When you meet them in the shopping centres or by the ticket machines at the carpark, what goes through your mind? Do you find yourself thinking “Switzerland would be a much nicer place to live if we didn’t have these people”.

Maybe we would say this to the man begging.

- **“We’d love to help you, but right now we’re going to church. We don’t have time”**

We’re goal oriented people, and we don’t have time for interruptions like you. The prayer meeting starts at 3 o’clock, and it wouldn’t look good for us to walk in late. Sorry, but we are in a hurry. God won’t be impressed if we arrive late for an appointment with him.

Perhaps we would say to him,

- **“We know you have a need, but it’s OK – lucky for you we are going to a prayer meeting. We will pray for you there.”**

That’s always a handy way of not having to get involved. Instead of doing something, we can say “I’ll pray for you” or “I’ll get others to pray for you”.

Another thing we might think is

- **“Why is it that we get to do all the work around here? Why can’t someone else help him?”**

Why do we have to do everything at church? Why can’t George do it? Or Susan? This is my day of rest. I come to church to get fed, not to do ministry. Why can’t other people pull their weight and do something for this beggar? I’ve got too many things on my plate already.

Perhaps we would say to each other,

- **“Why is it every time we come to church someone asks us for money?”**

It’s always about money. People always want our money. Why don’t they leave us alone?

Or we could say,

- **“Well, I don’t have any money on me, so I’m not responsible.”**

It’s not my problem because I don’t have anything to give.

Have you found yourself thinking or saying those things when confronted by needy people? I have. I find myself hugely challenged by this scripture, so I don’t want you to think that I’m exempt from the lessons of this scripture. This applies to me too.

Thank God that Peter and John did what they did. They didn’t walk on by. They didn’t ignore the man begging. Do you find yourself not wanting to make eye contact with beggars? Pretend you didn’t see them? Or if you don’t speak French, pretend you don’t understand what they are asking? Peter and John not only stopped, but they looked the man in the eye. Then they said to him “look at us”. Wow! When you do that with a beggar, there is no way you can walk away. When they looked that man in the eye, they were committed to doing something. Now where did they learn to do that?

They learned that from Jesus. That's what Jesus used to do. Peter and John looked this man in the eye, and rather than go on about what they didn't have, gave him what they did have. They had the power and authority of Jesus, and in Jesus name, commanded him to get up and walk. And putting their faith into practice, they didn't just fold their arms and watch, but took the man by the hand, and helped him to his feet. Acting in the name of Jesus isn't just about telling people to get up and walk, but taking them by the hand and helping them up. And you know the rest of the story. This lame beggar, who asked for alms, got legs instead. He was up on his feet, walking and jumping and praising God. But that wasn't the end of the story. By now a large crowd had gathered as the word of this miracle spread. Peter then proclaimed Jesus, explaining not only whose power it was that had given this man a new life, but went on to explain who Jesus was and calling people to repent.

As I see the way Peter and John responded to needy people, I can identify three ways in which our response to needy people can fall far short of the way Jesus would respond. Here's the first.

1. Money Without Ministry.

It's tempting for us to take a shortcut and just give needy people money. Now in some cases, money is needed, and money may be a way of showing people that God cares. It may be buying someone a meal, or taking them shopping, or filling their car with gas, or paying their rent or electricity bill. But often it's not money, but ministry that is needed. We get into this mindset that unless we have money, we can't do ministry. But if you look at the example of Jesus, look how many lives he changed without giving out any money. And we can exercise that sort of ministry too. The ministry of spending time with someone. The ministry of listening. The ministry of practical help, like looking after children, or inviting a single person to join you in a family activity. It might be the ministry of praying with them. Have you ever wondered what would have happened if Peter and John did have money in their pockets, and had given the man money and then walked away? There would have been money, but no ministry. The man still would have been lame. He still would have been begging. And he wouldn't have discovered the amazing power and love of God. When we have money, we are tempted to rely on money rather than ministry to help those in need. Money without ministry is shortchanging people in need of all that God has to offer. There has to be more than money.

2. Ministry Without Power.

This is one of the greatest challenges for the church today. We have lots of ministry going on, but so much of it is without the supernatural power of God. The thing that challenges me from this scripture is that it was ministry done in the power of the Holy Spirit. Supernatural things were happening as Peter and John cared for this man. A miracle of healing happened. A broken body was restored to the point where a lame man was walking and leaping and praising God. A crushed, despairing spirit was full of hope for the future. This is where so many of us fall short. We meet the need on the physical level, but we don't take the next step and ask God to break in to the situation with supernatural power. We show our concern, and we sit with people in their need, but how often do we say "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!" How many of us are like Peter and John - full of the Holy Spirit, confident of our authority in Christ, stepping out in faith and believing God to do the miraculous? Recently Lyn and I read through the book of Acts together. Over and over again we kept asking the question, "Why are we not seeing these things happen today?"

Where are the signs and wonders validating the ministry that is going on in the name of Jesus? I have to confess that so often it's because I'm not bold enough to take the next step. If you don't find the book of Acts a challenge, go back and read it again.

Here's the third challenge for us in our generation.

3. Miracles Without Proclamation.

After the healing of this man, Peter was quick to explain that this had happened because of Jesus. Healing is not an end in itself, but a starting point to tell people about Jesus. If we are feeding the hungry and caring for the sick and educating the poor and showing God's love to the needy but not telling them the good news of the Gospel, we are, as a friend of mine once said, "making them well on their way to hell". Peter wanted people to understand that complete healing comes through Jesus. It's not just healing for broken bodies, but the saving life of Christ, that people need to know about.

Compared to the rest of the world, money isn't the problem for those of us who live in Switzerland. There are many of us here today that are making genuine attempts to be involved in ministry to those in need. But I think most of us would admit that we have much to learn about ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit. It's not often that we see evidence of spiritual power through the things we do in Jesus name. And despite the fact that we make friends with those who don't know Christ, we struggle to know how to take our relationships with unbelievers beyond the superficial. I think most of us would long to have the boldness of Peter, who boldly explained that this healing was the work of Jesus.

Now here is the point where all of this touches ground for us. When we walk out of here today, or perhaps even before we walk out of here today, we are going to encounter the inconvenience of someone in need. When we do, we are going to remember this story of Peter and John and the lame man. And the Spirit of God is going to speak to us and prompt us to respond to that person in need. Let's take a moment now to make ourselves available to the Lord, so that he knows that he can use us.

Prayer

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