

COMPASSION AND A RATIONALE

ACTS 3:1-10 SEPTEMBER 11, 2019

How do you help a person in need? The answer will change depending on the person and the need and the resources you have available to potentially apply to the situation.

You may be surprised to know that, at least when it comes to dollars and cents, we are living in the most charitable era in American history. In fact, in the 4 decades leading up to 2017, giving in America increased in terms of dollars every single year except for 1987, 2008 and 2009.¹

One charitable organization says this on its website: “philanthropy today is more organized, professional, and global than ever before.”²

But while a lot of charity is going on, there is not only big discussion over what is the best way to accomplish it, there’s also some talk of whether a lot of modern philanthropy really works.

In 2012, *Forbes* published an article titled: *Why Your Charitable Donations Probably Aren't Doing Much Good*. In 2010, *The Atlantic* published a piece titled: *Does Large-Scale Philanthropy Work?* They wrote: “Many experts have found that good intentions still produce unintended consequences...The best model...doesn’t seem to be 100% clear.”³

There are some that feel the best form of charity is education. “Teach a man to fish.” Others feel that micro-loans are the philanthropy of the future. Others say just pumping more money into existing systems will continue to raise millions of people out of poverty. Some feel that “brand” philanthropy, exemplified by Toms Shoes is a great way to go. Still others say that deregulation in developing nations is the key to helping those in need.

None of this is a criticism of charitable work. *Many* people are doing *many* things to bring help and relief to those in desperate need. But we notice there is wide variety (and even disagreement) about how *best* to do it.

Within the Church we can also find disagreement. How do we *help* the world in need. Of course, the Church deals with an additional layer that organizations like The Gates Foundation or Toms Shoes don’t consider, and that’s the *spiritual* need of individuals. People aren’t just cold and hungry, they’re also dead in trespasses and sins. And Jesus has sent His Body out, into every corner of the earth to...do what? That’s a question that Christians don’t always agree on.

Perhaps you’ve heard the term “missional” when it comes to Christianity or the Church. It is somewhat of a buzzword. It is thrown around a lot and variously defined depending on who is using it. One organization discusses it this way: “Since the [early 1990’s], a plethora of books and conferences have used the term *missional*. Not all of them reflect the [same idea]. [Some] participants...often advocate a broader understanding of mission, one that lacks a clear emphasis on proclamation evangelism.”⁴

¹ <https://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=content.view&cpid=42>

² <https://www.historyofgiving.org/1980-present/>

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2010/09/does-large-scale-philanthropy-work/340089/>

⁴ <https://www.efca.org/blog/church-multiplication/understanding-missional-church>

In an article on The Christian Post I read: “rather than being ‘evangelical’...perhaps we should consider returning to being ‘missional’ in the manner of our first and second century brothers and sisters.”⁵

How *did* the first century Christians go about their mission? What did *compassion* and *charity* look like when they were doing it? We’ve already seen a bit from their communal style there in the infancy of the Church. But tonight we have a wonderful text that shows Peter and John encountering a beggar and ministering to him. This is *great* because the basic situation is one that still happens to us today. All over Hanford we encounter beggars and people in need. But on a greater level we see here an example of Spirit-filled people, living out their Christianity, being used by God to help someone. And so we want to take notice of what is preserved for us here because, we also want to know how to help people in this world that is in such desperate need.

Acts 3:1 - Now Peter and John were going up together to the temple complex at the hour of prayer at three in the afternoon.

Devout Jews observed 3 times of prayer each day. We can’t always be sure, historically, of what all occurred at these various meetings. But this hour of prayer would’ve coincided with the evening sacrifice.⁶

What we note is that Peter and John were headed up to the Temple as usual. This tells us quite a few things. First of all, even though they were the leaders of a group of *thousands*, they still lived a normal life. They didn’t seclude themselves like celebrities often do today. They didn’t have an entourage of handlers around them. We also see that their prominence and importance didn’t keep them from the regular disciplines of Christian life. Think for a moment of how *busy* they would’ve been. I mean, the apostles were the guys who had walked with Jesus and talked with Jesus. God was working signs and wonders through them. They were responsible to shepherd a congregation of thousands who would’ve wanted to know everything they could about Jesus and had to go to *these men* to find out about it (there were no Gospels yet). There were spiritual needs and practical needs and incredible logistical problems to solve. But, verse 1 shows that despite all of that, they weren’t too busy to go and pray, *every day*. Probably *3 times* a day!

Verse 1 also reveals that the very first ministry outreach of the Church age we have recorded for us was *unplanned*. Of course, lots had been happening every day among God’s people, but this is the first story of Christians going out and doing an outreach. In fact, we’ll see it’s *literally* an outreach as Peter *reaches* down and grabs this crippled man. But they had made no plan to minister to anyone that day. They were on their way to prayer and *God* interrupted them with a great opportunity for His power to flow through them.

Acts 3:2 - ²And a man who was lame from birth was carried there and placed every day at the temple gate called Beautiful, so he could beg from those entering the temple complex.

We’ll learn in chapter 4 that this fellow was over 40 years old. We’re told that this particular spot was his regular place. Every day he set up there. And it must have been for quite some time because, by the end, we’ll see that the average person in the Temple *recognized* him. The implication here is that, *almost assuredly*, Jesus Himself had seen this man and walked by him at some point, maybe *many* times.

⁵ <https://www.christianpost.com/news/missional-vs-evangelical.html>

⁶ Alfred Edersheim *The Temple*

Now we can say this about the crippled man: He had some very compassionate friends. It usually feels inconvenient just to give a friend a ride somewhere! This guy had some friends who went and picked him up and *physically carried* him to his gate *every single day*. That's a significant amount of charity! But their compassion, though commendable, could not help in a lasting way. They could only bring him as far as the gate. As a cripple, he was not allowed *inside* the Temple. Nor could their daily compassion of carrying him do *anything* to solve his greater problems.

Instead, day after day he would lay there, hearing the music and smelling the incense coming from inside the complex. And as people came by he begged for enough coin to survive another day.

Acts 3:3 - ³ When he saw Peter and John about to enter the temple complex, he asked for help.

The man asked them for *money*. And he definitely *needed* money. We would *still* need money, or at least provision *after* his healing, by the way. But he had many *other* needs. He needed two working feet. Without that, he was utterly hopeless in that era and that culture. Even *more* than that, he needed to be reconciled to God. The fact that he was left on the doorstep of the Temple would've been a constant reminder to him of his separation. Under the Levitical system *he was not allowed in* to offer his sacrifices. And that's a real problem. But, you see, there was no glimmer of hope in his mind that anything could *ever* be done about his feet or his distance from Jehovah. So he doesn't ask for help on that level.

As Christians, we're often able to more fully diagnose the needs of people than they are themselves. It's *never* just the physical need that is the problem. There are spiritual and eternal issues in play.

Acts 3:4 - ⁴ Peter, along with John, looked at him intently and said, "Look at us."

Peter will be the one speaking in this scene, but we shouldn't discount John's part in this ministry. They're unified and cooperating together.

I like what Peter says: "Look at us." It seems the crippled man was just sort of generically holding out his hand, not really making eye contact. And Peter wants to interact with him, so he gets his attention. But I think there's a good chance that Peter was also sort of saying, "Look at us. Do we *look* like we have anything to give you?" Their robes were undoubtedly faded and worn from the countless hours on the Sea of Galilee. Their pockets didn't jingle when they walked. Remember, when they were with Jesus, they didn't even have money to cover their tax bill. But purposefully getting the attention of a beggar can't help but kindle their expectation.

Acts 3:5 - ⁵ So he turned to them, expecting to get something from them.

Just as a quick, devotional question we can each pose to ourselves tonight: When someone looks at you, what do they expect to receive? Of course, it's never fair to judge a book by its cover. We know God looks on the heart. At the same time, your countenance, behavior and demeanor are *broadcasting* things to the world at large. One admirable characteristic of the Christians in Acts is how they were welcoming and winsome. They were gracious people. Remember: They will know we are Christians by our love. Our countenance should be Christ-like.

Acts 3:6 - ⁶ But Peter said, “I don’t have silver or gold, but what I have, I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!”

We saw in earlier passages how the first Christians were living with “all things in common.” Yet, it clearly wasn’t some form of communism in the way we think of it. Peter had *no money* to give the man. There wasn’t some big bowl of gold that you could draw from on your way out of the house.

Now, notice what Peter says. He doesn’t say, “You don’t *need* silver and gold.” He says, in essence, “I know you need money, but that I can’t help you with right now.” We don’t get the rest of this man’s story, but he’s going to be brought into the Church and there they, of course, *would* help him with things like food and money and supplies. He’d need a *lot* of help that would require the generosity of other, more fortunate believers. It would come later, but it would still come.

I’d also have us note that Peter said, “what I have I *give* you.” Not “sell” you, but *give*. Ministry wasn’t withheld until the man became a member or signed a pledge. He didn’t have to buy a book or supply a mailing address. It was a free gift.

At *this* point, though, God had a much greater plan for the man than simply money for one more meal. The Holy Spirit somehow clued Peter in on what should be done. We’re not given the internal conversation Peter had with the Lord, but there must have been something. On the one hand, Peter (in the Gospels) was sometimes impulsive. But it often wasn’t in good ways. On the *other* hand, we’ll see later in Acts Peter a little slow to take up an opportunity God presents before him. We don’t know all that transpired that afternoon between the disciple and his Lord, but that’s ok. Because it’s not meant to be a *formula*. Rather, it’s an example of how God can invade your regular activities and minister through you. And if we are seeking after Him, as we’re commanded to, if we’re intent on discovering the good works He has established beforehand for us to walk in, then we’ll find ourselves in these sort of divine appointments and be able to walk in faith when they present themselves. Peter had, for sure, passed by this man many times. Even just the day before. But *today* was the day that God was going to do something different and Peter was ready to listen for that leading and be obedient when God directed him.

Acts 3:7 - ⁷ Then, taking him by the right hand he raised him up, and at once his feet and ankles became strong.

God did something impossible that day. Let’s never tire of reminding ourselves and each other that God does impossible things. He can heal the sick. He can end wars. He can repair relationships. He can rescue prodigals. He is still the God of miracles.

In this instant, Peter clearly, firmly believed in what was going to happen. This isn’t always how things go when we walk with God. When you read biographies of some of the heroes of Christian history - people like George Mueller or Gladys Aylward - there were times when they a clear, confident understanding of what God was going to do in a given situation and many other times when they admitted they had no idea how God was going to act to help them or even *whether* He was going to. Our expectation is that God *will* indeed lead us, and we want to develop more and more sensitivity to His leading.

Acts 3:8 - ⁸ So he jumped up, stood, and started to walk, and he entered the temple complex with them—walking, leaping, and praising God.

The man had a complete transformation and with that transformation came sudden access like he'd never known. He was *immediately* able to go into the Temple. He was *immediately* part of the proclamation of the Gospel. He was immediately invited to be a part of the congregation. In fact, Peter, for his part, seems to have said, "Hey you can walk. Wanna come with us? We're gonna be late for prayer." He didn't start saying, "I HAVE HEALED A MAN!" No, this remarkable thing happened, but Peter says, "We're headed this way. Why don't you come along."

Acts 3:9-10 - ⁹All the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰and they recognized that he was the one who used to sit and beg at the Beautiful Gate of the temple complex. So they were filled with awe and astonishment at what had happened to him.

It would be mind blowing for this to happen, but for a Jew there was an even greater significance to what they were seeing. Because they all knew that Isaiah had prophesied that the leaping of a lame man was a sign of the Messiah and the coming Kingdom. And this was no illusion, no trick or manipulation. They all recognized the man. And here he was, completely disrupting their prayer service with his loud leaping and praising. This is such a big deal that everyone is going to stop what they're doing, rush to Peter and, ultimately, thousands more will put their faith in Jesus Christ.

For now, we turn our thought to the opening question of compassion. Yes, this situation is a sample of the signs and wonders that we were told about in chapter 2, verse 43. But it's also a demonstration of Christians doing ministry. We see God's people reaching out with compassion to a man in need. And how best to do that is a topic of debate within the Church.

So what can we say about what we see here? First and foremost, it was a work led, empowered and *timed* by the Spirit. Peter and John made no plan to do this. That doesn't mean we shouldn't plan ministry, but a lot of 'ministry' gets planned and attempted when the Spirit hasn't led at all. Christians and churches all the time are doing things that *seem* like a good idea, but this man's story challenges us to really wait for the Spirit's leading. Jesus didn't heal him. *Peter* didn't heal him just the day before. And think about this: Warren Wiersbe points out there were probably *tons* of other cripples in the area. Why not them? Why *this* guy on *this* day? That's the Lord's business. Maybe it was because the Lord knew it would lead to the conversion of thousands. The Lord is the head. He's the decider. We're supposed to be the Body being directed, not just doing what *seems* good to us.

Second, as we think about this ministry of compassion, Peter and John picked up where the man's friends had to leave off. They could take him as far as the gate. The ministry of Jesus Christ could bring him *through*. The symbolism is simple. Ministers of the Gospel are able to address the spiritual and eternal problems that non-Christian charity can never hope to solve. This is why it's so important that we not just jettison the idea of preaching or conversion when it comes to ministry. We can do practical compassion (feeding people, meeting their physical needs), in fact we'll see the Christians in Acts doing some of that, but *we alone* have the power that can bring people through the gate into the presence of God. We alone have the power that can transform their lives and eternities. When Christians say, "Let's stop being so preachy and just focus on practical compassion," then the Church just becomes like the friends that carried the cripple to the gate. Practical compassion can only go so far and then it's done.

On the flip side, the Christians in Acts didn't *ignore* physical needs. This man was now part of the community that was providing for one another. Having all things in common. Once this whole situation played out, he'd be brought to one of the houses where they'd give him a meal, probably

some new clothes, who knows what else. Peter sums up the Christian attitude of compassion when he says, "What I have I give you."

You and I may not have the power, in a given situation, to heal someone. That has to come directly from the Lord. Maybe He'll use us in that way, maybe He won't. But, in the mean time, as we live out our regular lives, we expect the Lord to bring us into the path of needy people. And when we get an opportunity to show compassion, our attitude should be "what I *have*, I give you." Because we *do* have resources. We *do* have a message. We *do* have a community. We *do* have answers. We have lots of things to give. *What* to give, how to give it, who to give it to and when, well that has to be directed by God the Holy Spirit. We trust Him to lead. We choose to obey. And our wonderful God will do what He loves to do - glorify Himself, transform lives, and accomplish more than we could ever ask or imagine.