

“The Church of the Helping Hand”

Introduction: Despite all of the dramatic events we find in the opening chapters of Acts, from the ascension of Jesus into heaven, to the coming to earth of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to the immediate conversion of 3000 people in response to the preaching of Peter, Acts chapter two ends with a rather quiet, cozy picture of the church. It was a group that studied the apostles’ teaching, enjoyed fellowship with one another, broke bread together, and prayed regularly. They also shared such care that if anyone had a financial need, someone would sell property, or some other possession, to meet that need.

But, as Luke goes on in chapter 3 to describe, the church doesn’t exist to simply serve itself. Gathering together was in no way intended to provide members a means of escape *from the world* but to become better prepared to reach out and lend a helping hand *to the world*. This is made clear from the start, as on one of those early days in the life of the church, we see Peter and John, while on their way to pray, almost missing it but ultimately drawn in to care for a lame man who we could say represents the misery that is in the world. What did they have to give him? What does the church in any age have to give as we move out into the world?

Let’s have our children present the text to us and then we’ll ponder these questions.

I. In the Midst of Misery

A. We meet Peter and John, two of the original followers of Jesus, as they are about to enter one of the gates to the Temple in Jerusalem. Interestingly, it’s a gate called by the name Beautiful. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us why. He describes this gate as 75 feet high, overlaid with bronze, and such a work of art that it far exceeded in value the gates plated with silver and gold. Peter and John were on their way to participate in one of the three prayer services that took place each day in the Temple. But what is interesting to note is that they almost walked right past something, right past someone, who was not so beautiful, at least so it seemed. It was a lame man who, like many who suffered from his condition, was carried each day to the Temple by friends who would put him in a visible place to beg from those visiting that sacred place.

B. Now, we can get so caught up in what God did for this man that we can miss what God was doing in Peter and John. You have to wonder how many times they had walked past this man. Of course, it’s easy to do. If you’ve ever traveled in the less-developed world, or even commuted into Boston and walked from the train station to the financial district, you can see the poor and impoverished along the way, folks who have their regular spots from which they try to beg a living. They sort of become a part of the landscape; you just keep on walking.

In this instance, they only stopped because the man called out to them. When I keep wondering is this: Could this have been Jesus who, through this lame man, was calling out to them? We read in the gospel of Matthew a teaching by Jesus in which he says that when we stop and minister to human misery, when we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, visit the imprisoned, care for the sick, and clothe the needy we are actually meeting Jesus (Ma. 25:31-46). Could Jesus have been saying to them, “Yes, prayer is incredibly important, but if it doesn’t lead to compassion, it’s not much good.” And, “Yes, it’s great to have beautiful facilities in which to meet, but meeting together is not to be the end of the story.”

C. There is an old hymn, “Sweet Hour of Prayer,” which has as its opening line: “Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer, that calls me from a world of care . . .” And that is a wonderful invitation and reminder to bring the ills of the world, that can be overwhelming, to the throne of God’s grace. But once we do that, prayer, as well as study and fellowship, is to prepare us and equip us and empower us to move back out into the world with the healing love of Jesus to meet the misery that we can see. Jesus, I think it’s fair say, was helping Peter and John and the early church to recognize this. The path Jesus calls us to walk in this world doesn’t go around human misery but straight to it. If it’s genuine, prayer must lead to care.

II. A Helping Hand

A. Now, what was it that Peter and John had to offer? What does the church have to give as we move out into the world? The lame man thought that when Peter and John responded to his cry, that a stash of cash might be forthcoming. Indeed, there are times when financial support is truly helpful. But as it turns out, Peter and John had something deeper to offer. It began when Peter extended his hand and helped the man to his feet. As Peter would go on to explain, the healing the man experienced was a result of the power of Jesus. But the hand that connected the man to Jesus was the hand of Peter. Had Peter not pulled this cripple up, would he have ever believed that his feet and ankles had been restored? Quite often, what people need is a hand that helps them begin to know and experience Jesus, a hand that helps them begin to walk by faith.

B. Does that mean, we might be led to ask, that it is ministry physical healing that we should be offering? If so, why don’t more people get healed? That’s a hard question and one to which only God knows the answer! God heals when and where he wills. In the gospel accounts, we see Jesus heal in response to faith, and also to bring about faith. We see him heal out of compassion for the individual, to demonstrate his authority, to reveal the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. We see him heal as a sign that the ultimate restoration of all things was coming, and to give us a picture of the spiritual healing we all need to enjoy that coming.

C. What I do know, as we go on to read Peter’s explanation to the crowd who witnessed this event, is that the primary healing the church has to offer is spiritual. Peter does not conclude, as the lame man dances off into the sunset, by urging the crowd to bring him all their sick relatives and friends. Instead, he puts everything they have seen into the context of the death and resurrection of Jesus and then concludes: “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord . . . until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago . . .” (3:19, 21). Even those who are healed physically would need to know of this ultimate, lasting healing.

D. The most severe misery we face arises out of the illness that comes from sin, a sickness that prevents us from relating properly to God, to one another, to ourselves, and to God’s creation. Turning to the one who has the power to heal you spiritually, as evidenced and pictured by this physical healing, is the prescription Peter brings to the man, to the crowd, and to us.

As we move out into the world, may we not seek to walk around human misery, but to reach out with a helping hand, a hand that both helps put others back on their feet, and a hand that helps them see the ultimate, lasting, and eternal healing that Jesus brings.