

REACHING THE CULTURE AND THE NATIONS FOR THE GLORY OF CHRIST

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If you have a Bible, and I hope you do, I invite you to open with me to Acts 3.

I want to encourage us this morning with a picture of the people of God in the New Testament that I pray will be a reality among the people of God today. Specifically, I want to encourage us with three prayers that we might pray together based on Acts 3:1-10.

One day, Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer, at 3:00 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. And 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, and 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." And 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.

First, I want to encourage us to pray that God would give us a radical concern for the needs of the world around us. I love the contrast between the end of Acts 2 and the beginning of Acts 3. At the end of Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost, over 3,000 people were saved. Talk about a good day for church growth! But what I find most interesting is that the next scene Luke chooses to give us in Acts is not a scene involving the masses. Instead, it's a scene involving one man that the masses were ignoring. There is a reality that is being illustrated here, brothers and sisters. Those who are most effective in reaching the many are those who are most passionate about reaching the one.

The disciples had learned this from Jesus. Peter and John had seen Jesus with the crowds gathering around Him. Like us, they thought the bigger the better; the more crowds, the better. But Jesus is so unlike us. In John 6, when the crowd started getting big, Jesus started talking about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. I can just imagine the look on the disciples' faces as they thought, "We'll never get on the list of fastest growing

movements if you keep telling people to eat you. 'This doesn't work!' And it didn't. All the people scattered. The disciples were shocked when Jesus stopped for the blind beggar, when He stopped for the woman with the flow of blood, when He stopped for the man with leprosy, and when He stopped for the boy with an evil spirit. This is what the disciples had seen modeled in Christ.

When you look at the language in verse 4, you realize that these are the same words that are used later in Acts 7 when Stephen looked up into heaven and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. This is an intense look. There is a focus on need here in Acts 3 and all over the pages of the story of the early church. They cared for the poor, the lost, the needy.

If I could be honest with you, this is where I, in my own life and as a young pastor, have come to a bit of a crisis of belief. This crisis of belief revolves around whether or not I actually believe the Bible. Not, "Do I believe the Bible is true or accurate or in error?" But instead, "Do I believe this Book in a way that radically changes the way I live and pastor?" Because if this Book is true, then the implications are nothing short of staggering. There are 6.8 billion people in the world. Most liberal estimates put the world at one-third Christian, and that includes people who claim to be Christian socially or politically in many contexts. Likely not all of them are actually followers of Christ. But even if they were, that still leaves 4.5 billion people on the planet today who at this moment are on a road that leads to an eternity in hell, if the Bible is true.

On top of this massive spiritual need, we are surrounded by massive physical need. While we meet here, 16,000 children will die because they don't have food. If that is true, and if the Bible says that all throughout the history of God's people, He has chosen to measure the integrity of our faith by our concern for the poor, then there are radical implications here. We do not have time to play games with our lives and we do not have time to play games in the church when there are over 4.5 billion people going to hell and 16,000 kids that don't have a meal today. We need God to give us His concern for the needs around us. This is not something we can manufacture. It's something Christ alone can produce in us.

So let's run to Christ and let's ask Him to give us a radical concern for the needs of the world around us. Let's ask Him to keep us from turning a deaf ear to the poor. It frightens me when I consider the fact that I can pastor successfully in our church culture today in Birmingham, AL, and yet ignore those kids, pretending like they don't even exist. God give us a radical concern for the needs of those around us.

Second, let's pray that God would give us a radical confidence in the name of the one who has saved us." Who is the hero in Acts 3? Is it Peter? It takes a lot of courage to go up to a man who hasn't walked since birth (40 years!) and to tell him to get up and walk. Is Peter the hero? What about John? Maybe best actor in a supporting role? Is John the hero? Or is the lame man the hero as he jumps up and down, praising God? I do not believe Peter is the hero, and neither are John or the lame man. The hero in this story is the name of Jesus Christ. "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

Luke wants to make sure we get this. Look down later in the chapter at verse 16. You might even circle it every time you see it. Verse 16 says, “My faith in the *name* of Jesus, this man whom you see and know is made strong. It is Jesus’ *name* and the faith that comes through Him that has given this complete healing to him, as you all can see.” Now look over in chapter 4 where Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin, and they were asked the question in verse 7, “In what power or what *name* did you do this?” The Sanhedrin knew there was a name behind this. In verse 10, Peter responded, “Know this, you and all the people of Israel. It is by the *name* of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, that this man stands before you healed.” In verse 12, he proclaimed, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other *name* under heaven whereby we can be saved.” In verse 17, the Sanhedrin concluded, “To stop this from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this *name*.” These folks at the Sanhedrin were afraid of the name, and they knew there was power in the name! In verse 18, they called in Peter and John and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

If we had time, we could trace through the entire Book of Acts and you could see this emphasis over and over again on the name of Jesus. It is the name of Jesus that is causing the most hardened hearts to repent. It is the name of Jesus that is causing demons to flee. It is the name of Jesus for which people are risking their lives all over the Book of Acts. The church had radical confidence in his name.

I was teaching in a seminary in Indonesia where students were planting churches all over that Muslim-dominated nation. One brother was sharing his story with us, telling us that before he came to Christ, he was a fighter. He said, “I know ninja, jujitsu.” He started naming a variety of different fighting techniques. He said, “I could take people down.” We said, “We’ll take your word for it.”

He said, “When Christ saved me, He turned my heart upside down.” Then he told us a story about a time when he was in a village completely unreached with the Gospel. He was in a home in that village sharing the Gospel when the witch doctor from the village came to confront him. Basically, the witch doctor stood outside the house and called him out to fight with him. This guy said, “I turned around and I was ready to take the witch doctor down.” But then he said, “As I was walking out, I sensed the Lord saying, ‘You don’t do the fighting anymore. I do the fighting for you.’”

So he walked out, pulled up a chair, sat down right in front of the witch doctor, and he said, “I don’t do the fighting anymore. My God does the fighting for me.” He said the witch doctor began to speak, and as he began to speak, the witch doctor began to gasp for air, choking on his own words, and within a matter of moments he had fallen over dead. Crowds came rushing to see what had happened. He said, “I didn’t know what to do, so I just preached the Gospel, and people in the village started coming to Christ!”

Now, I’m not sharing this story to recommend this particular method of evangelism. I don’t think that will sell at Lifeway. But I do share that story with you this morning to remind you that 2,000 years ago, there was a name that when it was proclaimed, it caused the blind to see and the lame to walk, it caused demons to flee and the dead to rise again, and 2,000 years later, the name is still good.

Brothers and sisters, we cannot control the culture and the world around us, but we can control our confidence in the name of Jesus Christ. His name is powerful. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. He is the final Amen. He is the bread of life, Christ, our Creator, our Deliverer, our Everlasting Father. He is God. He is the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd, the Great High Priest, the Holy One, the hope of glory. He is the great I Am, the image of the invisible God. He is the Judge of the living and the dead, King of kings, and Lord of lords. He is majestic and mighty, and no one compares to Him, the only begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. He is the power of God, the resurrection and the life, the supreme sacrifice, the very Word of God made flesh.

Jesus is all of these things. And brothers and sisters, in our evangelism we do not need to reduce Him to a poor, puny savior who is just begging for people to accept Him. As if Jesus needs our acceptance! He doesn't need our acceptance. He is infinitely worthy of all glory in all the universe, and He doesn't need us at all. We need Him. The name of Christ is powerful enough to bring any person in our communities, any person in our cities, and any person in the nations to Himself. God, give us radical confidence in the name of the one who has saved us.

And God, give us a radical commitment to telling the nations about His greatness. The rest of this story gives us the first glimpse into persecution in the early church. As Peter and John preached the Gospel to the crowd surrounding them, they were arrested, and by the end of chapter 4, we see the prayers of the persecuted church in Acts 4:23-30. By the end of Acts 5, they were rejoicing for being counted worthy to suffer for His name. By the end of Acts 7, we see first Christian martyr, and by Acts 8, they were scattering to Judea and Samaria preaching the Gospel wherever they went. By Acts 11, a base for ministry to the nations had been established in the city of Antioch. The rest of Acts is the story of a church that was radically committed to telling the nations about His greatness. Oh, I want my life to count, and I want the church I pastor to count for the nations.

I find it saddening that one of the most common questions in Christianity in our context today is, "What is God's will for my life? How do I find God's will for my life? What does God want me to do?" Meanwhile, there are 1.4 million Bedouins in Algeria. They are 100 percent Muslim. No Christians. No church. No missionary. No Gospel. No Jesus. And we are sitting over here saying, "What do you want me to do, God?" O God, raise up a church that is no longer content to wait for a tingly feeling to go down our spine to cause us to rise up and do what we have already been commanded to do. We don't have to ask questions about His will. He wants His Gospel and His glory in all nations. That is His will.

So what happens when not just missionaries, but also pastors, music ministers, and staff members, church members, accountants, engineers, teachers, lawyers, doctors, and stay-at-home moms all realize that we were all created for and commanded to accomplish a global mission? What happens when we begin to look at our houses and our cars and our stuff and our lifestyles in light of the radical needs around the world? What happens when we begin to trust boldly in the name of Christ and we commit our lives to telling the nations that He is great? When this happens, the lost will find a Savior, the poor will find a Helper,

and the church will discover a God who satisfies more deeply than anything and everything else this world has to offer us. God, may it be so.