



Grace at Ground Zero

Whenever we come to the end of the year and look towards the beginning of a new one, most of us pause and reflect on seasons past. It's a time to evaluate, a time to take our spiritual and emotional pulse. It's a time to ponder on what events shaped our experience in a positive or negative way. And I think it would be safe to say, that for most of us, the tragic events of September 11 influenced us like none other. There our nation stood attacked and vulnerable; the very fabric of our security hanging like a worn out thread. And as the dust cleared and we counted the losses, we began to get in touch with all those things we so take for granted - our physical, emotional and relational securities; here today, perhaps gone tomorrow. And we mourned! Yet out of the shadows of our grief came a renewed vision of hope. It came in the form of men and women everywhere helping others to recover. New York's finest! Countless workers sacrificing their lives at ground zero - to rescue those still trapped in the debris, salve wounds, minister grace and tend to the healing process; heroes, trench workers, God's servants in time of need - willing to become His practical arms of comfort in the midst of a decimated land.

So, in light of these events, the question for us this morning is: how can we as a church minister God's grace at ground zero in the seasons to come? How can we become His practical arms of comfort to those in need? And I think we can find an answer, at least in part, in the passage we are going to be looking at this morning. Turn with me to Acts 3 verses 1-11.

I. The Setting (3:1-3)

Verses 1-3 provide the setting for this story: **"Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer. And a certain man who had been lame from his mother's womb was being carried along, whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple. And when he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he began asking to receive alms."**

So we have these two apostles, Peter and John, going up to the temple to pray, as was their custom. Now think about these guys, Peter and John. What an odd couple - two men who, by nature, would get under each other's skin. Peter was the practical one, a doer. John was the mystic, a dreamer. Peter had his feet on the rock, John his head in the clouds. They had once been friends, bound to Jesus through their mutual discipleship to Him. But now, beyond the Cross and Resurrection, and after the Spirit had been poured out, they were brothers, two men enjoying intimate fellowship with one another.

It was the ninth hour or three o'clock in the afternoon, the very hour the darkness had lifted at Calvary, Jesus had died on the Cross, the hour He had cried out in a loud voice, "It

is finished," bowed His head and gave up His Spirit. It was a fitting time to reflect on these recent events, a time for two men who loved the Lord and each other to find themselves arriving at the place of prayer. And there they met this man who had been lame from birth.

Now let's slip on this cripples' shoes for a moment. Since birth he could go nowhere without help. He had never been able to stretch out his legs, walk to the neighborhood 7-11, play hop-scotch or basketball. Things we so take for granted. Instead, his legs were useless appendages, two constant reminders of the emptiness he felt deep within. There had never been a day when he had not been a burden to someone. All he could do was beg, sit there, and hope that his condition would provoke pity.

"Alms for the poor," he chanted, trying to catch someone's eye. If one had to beg, this was probably as good a place as any. It was a place of *beauty*. He had been placed on the steps leading up to the Gate, through which Jews passed into the various temple precincts. From where he sat he could stare at the beauty of that gate. It is said to have been made of Corinthian bronze. There were certainly worse places to beg.

It was, too, he hoped, a place of *bounty*. He was there **"to beg alms of those who were entering the temple."** If there was one place more than any other where one might have a generous notion towards his less fortunate neighbor, it would surely be here. Notice that the beggar's eyes were fixed on those going *into* the temple. On the way *in*, one's thoughts might be more focused on securing God's blessings with perhaps a gift or two, than on the way *out*.

Grinding poverty does not tend to lift a person's hope much higher than his material need. All he wanted was a coin or two to help him buy a crust of bread. And here we have these two apostles who had recently come to fame. They were leaders of a revival that was the talk of the town. Thousands had come to Christ since Peter preached at Pentecost. But this poor beggar had no thought for that. All he knew was that he was hungry, poor and crippled, that life had cheated him, and that if he didn't get a coin or two he would starve. His life had been reduced to that, to an outstretched palm, a pitiful look, and a sincere plea for help.

Isn't this poor lame man but a cameo of the entire human experience? We are all born with no legs of our own to stand before God. We stumble. We fall. The very best of us, outside of Christ, is but a hopeless spiritual cripple. That is who we are. But God takes us as we are, sometimes He breaks us in order to remake us into the kind of people who can then reflect His character to a broken world. He gives us this opportunity *and* then calls us to handle it responsibly. We have the opportunity to share the news that God is, indeed, concerned with the spiritual poverty of the world. *And* we have the responsibility to show other beggars where to find bread.

Humanity presents us with this opportunity on a daily basis.

God uses the physical disabilities in the world to show us the spiritual condition of others and their need of healing. When we see the blind we are reminded of the spiritually dark world in which we live. When we see beggars we are reminded of the spiritually poor - the needy, the outcast, those who feel as if they are far beyond the reach of grace. And so we are commissioned, broken vessels as we are, to minister His grace at ground zero.

The disciples once asked **“Rabbi, who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind?”** The disciples had evidently been taught, through their Judaic upbringing, that all suffering was a direct result of sin. **Jesus answered, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be manifest in him. We must work the works of Him that sent Me.”** Notice that Jesus does not deny the link between suffering and sin. The Scripture affirms that we are all affected by this principle of human evil. Because sin entered through Adam, the entire moral order has been wobbly and drunk ever since. And so, whether visibly or not, we are all handicapped. Our minds and bodies don't function as they were designed to. Our emotions, which God created as a source of joy, have become a source of pain. Everywhere humanity reflects the weakness of the Fall. So Jesus makes it clear that suffering is not always directly linked to personal or generational sin but, as in this case, **“that the work of God might be manifest.”**

There at the Gate, with all its splendor; there where the steps led up to the Temple the cripple lay. But notice that he is outside. That is humanity's position, in the midst of *beauty*, but not of it; within a stone's throw of *bounty*, but excluded. That is the position of humanity everywhere. It sighs and is in agony at the Beautiful Gate; but it cannot get in. And there, at ground zero, is our opportunity.

II. The Opportunity (3:4-8)

In verses 4-8 we see how the apostles seized this opportunity: **“And Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze upon him and said, “Look at us!” And he began to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, “I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene - walk!” And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened. And with a leap, he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.”**

“Look at us,” said Peter. Peter wanted to redirect the beggar's thoughts from his rags to the Redeemer. What would he see? Two poor peasants, Galilean fisherman. They weren't Rhodes scholars, Ivy League attorneys, or All-American athletes. Peter and John were just ordinary men with an extraordinary calling; people like you and I, seemingly without purpose until the Lord called them to be His disciples. Yet there was something different about them, something in their eyes, something in their heart. Peter and John wanted this beggar to see Jesus. But he was not yet ready for that. He must first see Jesus in

them. “Look on us!” Dare we say that to those around us? Are we such a reflection of Christ that to look on us is to look, as it were, on Him?

Sadly, to a world desperate for grace, today's church oftentimes represents just one more form of ungrace. A 16-year-old prostitute came in to see a counselor one day. Her life was at ground zero. She was homeless, dope sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through her tears, she told the counselor that she had been seeking the favor of men ever since her father molested her at age five. She had to do this, she said, to support her heroin habit. The counselor could hardly bear listening. For one thing, it made him legally liable, for he was required to report cases of child abuse. He didn't know what to say. At last he asked if she had ever thought about going to a church for help. With a look of pure shock she cried, “Church! Why would I ever go there? I'm already disgusted with myself. They'd just make me feel worse.” What is striking about this story is that those who found themselves at a place of quiet desperation ran towards the Jesus of the gospels, not away from Him. The worse a person felt about themselves, the more likely they would be drawn to Him as a safe harbor and refuge.

The gift of grace is Christ's, and therefore our great distinctive. It is the one thing the world cannot replicate, the one thing it craves above all else, for only grace can bring hope and healing to its jaded heart. There are many who sit outside the church walls who may have never imagined belonging to anything, let alone a church community, and yet are constantly looking at us. They're watching to see whether or not our actions reflect who we claim to be on the inside, whether or not we are ministers of grace. It is so important that we allow our faith to shine. Many who are living in the dark and experiencing great suffering will be drawn to the Lord as a result.

Peter and John desired above all else that this man see Jesus reflected in their eyes. And there he sat in anticipation, like a dog expecting a bone. Peter's first words must have dashed all hope. **“I do not possess silver and gold.”** He turned his pockets inside out. If he had had a coin, however small, it would have gone into the beggar's hand. And that would have been that. But he needed a miracle, and though Peter had no money, he could offer him new life in Christ. How different from the church today. Thomas Aquinas once visited Pope Innocent II and found him counting a large sum of money. “Ah, Thomas,” said the Pope, “the church can no longer say, ‘silver and gold have I none.’” “That is true,” said Aquinas, “but then, neither can it now say ‘Arise and walk.’”

Aquinas was saying that our riches, our culture of affluence, can have a devastating effect on our ministry to the poor if we are not careful. Why is that? Well, we could probably spend a lot of time talking about this but that is the subject of another sermon. Let me just simply say that riches can have a subtle way of distancing us from our primary values. We may begin to identify ourselves by the external rather than the internal, by what we have rather than who we are. And as we become more dependent and captured by the power of riches as the primary source of our identity, we would then become less open to God's grace poured out in our poverty. In ministering to the poor we must first be very well acquainted with our own poverty. That is the point of commonality *and* compassion, I might add. If we have difficulty accepting alms in the midst of our own neediness, how then can we give alms to others in need. We cannot give

what we are too prideful to receive.

Peter was poor, but he was rich towards God: **“What I do have I give to you,” he said. “In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene - walk!”** Peter’s intent was to offer this man a new identity in Christ. Jesus Christ of Nazareth! Hmmm! The beggar had heard of Him. Since Pentecost that is all he had heard, as he sat there in his need. Some were saying that He was a blasphemer, crucified for His sins; His body stolen to substantiate rumors of resurrection. Others were saying that He was alive from the dead, ascended into heaven, enthroned on high. Others talked about the newly formed community of those who believed in Him. Since Pentecost thousands had come to believe. They hung out at the Temple courts, for that was where they met. “In the name of Jesus Christ - walk,” Peter had said. And to help him, Peter reached down and held out his hand.

In the summer of 1992 I was involved in a serious accident that left me crippled from the waist down. After a series of operations the surgeons at Stanford Hospital were successful at resetting the multiple fractures and basically putting me back together with titanium pins, rods and hinges, duct tape and bailing wire. It had been two and a half months. During that time I had been immobile, unable to turn on my side or walk to the bathroom. And I can remember that day (that blessed day!!) when the physical therapy team came to my bedside to bring me the news - it was now time for me to arise and walk. They placed a walker next to my bed, helped me to sit up and gently lifted me on to my feet. The pain was more than I could bear. My feet swelled up like water balloons. I couldn’t feel the floor. But over a period of time and with their support I began to walk again. First with a walker, then with the aid of a pair of crutches and people (like my wife and friends) encouraging me to put one foot in front of the other, then to a cane, and finally my legs became strong enough to support my weight. This healing process took years and I am so thankful for those who walked alongside of me through it.

But unlike my experience, this particular healing was no gradual cure, it was instantaneous. At the mention of the name of Jesus something remarkable happened. Peter held out his hand, grabbed hold of the lame man and raised him to his feet. And in that very moment, he felt a strange strength in his legs and feet he had never known before and began to walk. He was no longer chained to charity. He was free! All of Jerusalem was before him. He could run, hop, skip, or jump wherever he pleased. Can you imagine! But notice where he went - with the believers. He accompanied them into the Temple, to that place of fellowship and prayer.

We too must go to the man or woman that lies at the Beautiful Gate begging alms, outside, and take him or her by the hand. This gesture must be a direct and intimate invitation; one that might say “Welcome, home!” We can’t afford to stand afar, like the older brother in the Prodigal Son. Our light is good for nothing if it is concealed. It doesn’t help for us to sing songs of hope for the dwellers in the valley and yet do nothing to meet their need. The church that comes down to the side of the wounded, and holds out its right hand is the church through which Christ is doing His own work.

It is here, in this encounter, that we reach into the pockets of our humanity for something more than a little loose change: a sympathetic smile, maybe, or a heartfelt prayer, a kind word or a gentle touch, a sacrificial gift perhaps, or a listening ear, a hot meal, if only for a day, a shelter from the storm, if only for

an evening. These are the things, even if it’s a very small thing, if done in Jesus’ name, stands for something beautiful. There is no benefit if we come in our own name, with our own agenda, expertise or strength. The man at the Beautiful Gate was healed by the authority of Jesus’s name alone, and not of man. Peter didn’t empower the miracle, Christ did, according to His sovereign will. Peter simply submitted himself to it and stood in the gap. In this way, Christ’s power restored dead limbs and began to revive a spiritually lifeless heart.

III. The Result (3:9-11)

In verses 9-11 we see the result: **“And all the people saw him walking and praising God; and they were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple to beg alms, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. And while he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement.”**

Everyone knew what his life had been like before. He had evidently been quite a character. They were well acquainted with his way of life, knew exactly where he was to be found. He was as much a fixture as the Beautiful Gate itself. Now here he was, showing off for all the world to see, the wonderful miracle that he had experienced in his life.

The world is always astonished at the evidence of new life in Christ. A man or woman comes into the blessing of salvation. Suddenly everything has changed. They are no longer hanging out at the old haunts - the street corners, pool rooms or porn shops, the back street bars. He is found instead in fellowship with the people of God, in the place where we gather to sing praises and give thanks to the Lord. He is walking new paths and praising the living God. The gift of grace is intended to provide this kind of amazement.

I think of the Higher Power Ministry in this way. Years ago when the Spirit first birthed the vision for this ministry our numbers were small. We never promoted ourselves through KFX radio or newsletters. We never knocked on doors or put our name on any marquis. But rather we trusted that if our ministry was of God then it would attract the suffering in the same way that Jesus did. It has! And through the years I have been consistently amazed at God’s faithfulness. Most often people come in the same way as this lame man, desperate and isolated, looking for something other than what they eventually received, “window shopping for a higher power,” we like to say. But over time the faithfulness of God and the strength of community wins out. The shackles come falling to the floor and those who once had no hope whatsoever begin to look at God and relationships in a new way. I can just picture God smiling ear to ear as He watches this kind of ministry in action.

Well, after the prayer meeting was over. Peter, John, and the healed man came out of the Temple, went back through the Beautiful Gate, and made their way across the outer court towards Solomon’s colonnade. Notice what the healed man was doing. He was hanging on to the older more experienced believers, the fishers and disciples of men. That is the thing to do.

When I first came to the Lord, and even today, I find

it is so important to allow others who have walked a few more spiritual miles to guide me. If I am going to stress the importance of discipleship then it makes sense that I too be disciplined. Now, I can't speak for you. You may have it all figured out, but my experience has been and continues to be that God is always placing me in circumstances I haven't navigated before. But one thing is sure, I will find myself with insufficient information and inadequate resources if I don't have spiritual veterans watching my back. This is one of the primary reasons that we stress community groups around here. They have the capacity to hold us up when we feel as if our spiritual legs are collapsing.

I don't know how many of you have had the privilege of riding on the Tokyo subway system. It's quite an experience. What makes it so unique is that they have these "subway pushers" at the train stations whose job description consists of maximizing the amount of people who can fit into a train. The subway pulls up to Shibuya or Shinjuku Station. The doors open wide. And this great sea of people crowd their way into the cars. The "subway pushers" job is to literally push the people in so that there is no longer any space available. That's their job. Now the downside, at least for those of us who prefer to hold our privacy rights tightly, is that it feels a little intrusive to have that many people in our space. But the greater benefit, at least as I see it, is that there is little room to fall. Only in community with other believers do we have this kind of security.

We can picture the man as he walked out of the Temple, right past the Beautiful Gate. He probably cast a passing glance at that spot where only that morning he had been, a prisoner to his misery and woe. Do you think he said to Peter, "Thanks for everything, Peter, but I'm going back to my old way of life. You see, I have this sentimental attachment to that isolated spot over there. It's all I know. Say hello when you come back again, hear"? Not a chance! He hung on to Peter and John for all it was worth. And he was thankful!

Well, this is a great story. What a great picture of ministry we get from this account. You know, all of us are crippled in one way or another. And I think this is what we primarily got in touch with on September 11th. How fragile life as we see it is! How fragile we are! The reality is that in some area of our lives we are all at ground zero. Perhaps you are living with a spouse or child who is entrenched in destructive lifestyles and nothing you say seems to make a difference. Maybe your trudging through a season of depression and can't remember when you last had a joyful day. Perhaps you or someone you love has a life threatening illness and your finding it increasingly difficult to muster enough courage to endure. Whatever the circumstances, you can be assured that God has a wonderful purpose - not after all suffering is passed, but in the midst of it.

You see, pain, like nothing else, keeps us aware of spiritual poverty. It is that which creates the emptiness into which Christ can then pour His strength and grace. In the same way our ministry to others can be healing when we

don't preside under the illusion that wholeness can be given by one to another, but only through Christ's redemptive work. More so when we give ourselves and others permission to recognize suffering on a level where it can be shared. Once expressed or confessed pain loses its awesome power to isolate. Many suffer because they anxiously search for the man or woman, the event or encounter, the drug or feeling that will take their loneliness away. There is great futility in this search. But when they enter a community where real love is communicated they soon recognize that these wounds must be understood not as a source of despair but as a sign that each of us must travel to its calling. We cannot save anyone this journey. We can only offer ourselves as fellow travelers, identifying with their suffering, reaching out our hands, and lifting others up. And it is here that the first signs of hope become visible. This is so because a shared pain is no longer paralyzing but mobilizing when understood as a way to freedom. When we become aware that we need not deny our pain but that it can be mobilized into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into visions of hope. And through this search, our love for one another becomes true fellowship, one that is based on a shared confession and a common desire for healing. This in turn leads us far beyond anything we can do for ourselves, to a God who calls us out of ground zero to a land of *beauty* and *bounty*. And a Son who's salvic work on a condemned man's cross provides both the means and the strength to walk there. To Him be the glory and honor, forever. Amen.

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