

“Effective Evangelism”

Acts 3:11-26

March 28, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

We’re concluding our series on the mission of the church by considering four sermons in the book of Acts. These sermons, two by Peter and two by Paul, show us how these two apostles understood the mission Jesus had given to them. The second of these four sermons is before us today, and it is Peter’s sermon in Acts 3. It follows the miracle of the healing of a lame beggar, a miracle resulting in utter amazement by many. This beggar seems to have been something of a well-known fixture in Jerusalem, due to the fact that his begging station was positioned at a frequently passed gate into the temple. So when he is healed in the name of Jesus, everyone recognizes him as that same man. Peter seized on their amazement to speak of Jesus, with the result that **“many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand”** (4:4). This is clearly a case of effective evangelism. What can we learn about evangelism from this healing and Peter’s subsequent sermon? I note here four components of effective evangelism.

I. Preparation

The table is set for Peter’s sermon in the miracle of the healing of the man lame from birth. Before effective evangelism can happen, preparation is needed. The hard, stony ground of the human heart must be broken up and made ready for the good seed of God’s word. This is work that only God can do, and we see him doing it here in the healing of this lame man. As Peter and John were entering the temple, he asked them for alms. They couldn’t give him what he wanted, because they had no money. But they could give him what he needed, which was something much better than money, because the power of Jesus was with them. So Peter said to him, **“I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!”** And he did. This man who had never taken a single step his entire life stood, walked and jumped in the air as he praised God. It seems that he didn’t do this quietly, because we read that **“all the people saw him walking and praising God... And they were filled with wonder and amazement”** (v. 9-10).

There are many ways that God prepares people to hear the gospel. I see two of these ways in this healing miracle: reversal and glimpses of glory. What I mean by reversal is God’s way of raising up and using the underdog. There are two underdogs in this healing incident, Jesus and the lame man. Jesus’ underdog status is indicated by the name Peter uses to bring healing: “Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” Do you remember what Nathanael said when his brother told him that

he had found the Messiah, and it was Jesus of Nazareth? **“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”** (John 1:46). Nazareth was the wrong side of the tracks, the last place from which a Messiah might be expected to emerge. But that’s exactly what happened. The lame man is an example of this same truth of reversal. As a lame man, he would not have been permitted to enter the temple. That’s why his friends placed him at the gate to do his begging. He was an outsider, cut off from Israel’s normal religious life. But now he becomes the catalyst of a great work of God.

We all love underdog stories. How many movies have been made that feature a team that everyone picks to fail, only to see them come together and win it all? You find yourself cheering for that team in the movie, and your heart rejoices when they finally win it all. Underdog stories stir us deeply. But God doesn’t tell an underdog story here to stir our emotions; he tells it to convert us. The reality is that we should see ourselves in this lame man. Our spiritual condition is analogous to his physical impotence. The reversal that must take place in the hearts of any who would come to faith in Christ is from human pride to humility, from self-trust to trust in God. We must see ourselves as spiritually powerless before we can come to God for his saving power.

There’s one other work of preparation God does here, and that is to give a glimpse of the new creation. When Jesus makes all things new, which he assures us he will do, all the brokenness of life will be reversed. The spiritual brokenness, the physical brokenness, the emotional and sexual brokenness—all will be reversed and healed. The result will be the same as what Peter’s hearers witnessed when they saw the healing of this lame man. Their reaction is described as wonder, amazement, and utter astonishment (v. 10-11). God gives us glimpses of this even now, sometimes in physical healing and at other times in relational healing. Or it could also be in the beauty of his created world that we might take the time to notice. When we pray for our friends and loved ones who don’t know Jesus, we should pray that God would prepare them to hear his word. And we should patiently wait on him to do so.

II. Connection

Peter seeks to connect his hearers to Jesus and not himself. It seems that the people who witnessed this miracle wanted to give Peter and John the credit for it. So Peter had to ask them, **“Men of Israel,... why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk?”** (v. 12). He then goes on to give the credit to the one to whom it is due, to Jesus. A common temptation in evangelism and all ministry is to go about it in a way that makes us look heroic. Though we may know better intellectually, we subtly attempt to present ourselves as the savior. We know what is best, and if people would just be more like us, then all would be well—or so we think. In our pride, we like to think that we can fix people if they would do what we tell them. But there is only one Savior,

and his name is Jesus. As the song says, “People need the Lord.” I find it helpful to think of all ministry as simply helping people get connected to the Lord. I may be the instrument the Lord chooses to use to that end, but at the end of the day Jesus is the only one who can truly help people. So they need to go to him.

How do we go about getting people connected to the Lord? I have noticed that it is often through pain that people come to the Lord. It is when we have no answer for the pain of our lives that our hearts often will be open to the Lord. We come to him when we have nowhere else to go. So part of effective evangelism often requires a willingness to enter into people’s pain with them and love them in it. We don’t enter into this pain in order to fix it. That was the mistake Job’s friends made. Rather, we enter in just to share the burden with them and help them take it to the Lord. Our temptation when we see people in pain is to withdraw from them. But we are called to do the opposite, to enter in as a fellow sufferer and trust God to use our presence with them to help them connect to the Lord.

A second feature of connection I see in this passage is that of bridge-building. Peter identifies with his hearers by speaking of their common heritage as Jews. They had a level of agreement in being followers of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We build bridges when we start with areas of agreement with others instead of areas of disagreement. We’re going to explore this in greater detail when we look at Paul’s sermon in Athens in Acts 17. But for now, we want to note the presence and importance of this feature. We look for areas we can affirm in others and say, “This desire you have is a good thing, but I’m afraid that you will never realize it without God’s help.” For example, we might say to a cynical friend something like, “You come across as very cynical, but I see someone who cares deeply about important things. You love your family very well and want good for them. That’s why I’m a follower of Jesus, because I believe he’s the only one who can bring about the good that I desire for my family.”

III. Wounding

Something that cannot be avoided in evangelism is wounding people. The reason is simple. If left to ourselves, every single individual who has ever lived pursues a path of self-destruction. The book of Proverbs says it well: **“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death”** (16:25). So the kindest thing we can say to people is to warn them about the path they are on and point the way to a better path, the path that leads to life. To present the gospel will always include an element of wounding.

Peter’s words inflict some wounds. He tells his hearers that in their call to crucify Jesus, they had acted against their own God. Jesus was glorified when God raised him from the dead. They had murdered an innocent man and had asked for a murderer, Barabbas, to be released instead of Jesus. And then he

speaks these striking words, **“You killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead”** (v. 15). Jesus is the Author of life. Who doesn’t want life? A central feature of sin is that people choose against their own well-being and life. Our culture embraces that absolute value of human choice. It tells us that everyone should be able to choose everything about their own lives, even to the point of reversing their biological gender. No one, so we are told, has the right to tell anyone else that they are wrong in a choice they might make. But what if our choices turn out to be against our own best interests? That was the case here. Peter tells people straight up that they committed a great wrong in their call for Jesus’ crucifixion. In doing so, they were acting against their own interests.

When we share the gospel, we cannot escape this need to wound people by telling them they are wrong. The trajectory of the life without God doesn’t end well, and the person on that path needs to be told that they are on the wrong path, just as the blind man needs to be warned away from the cliff’s edge that he is walking toward. That’s why Romans 1 teaches that God’s judgment in this present world is seen in giving people what they want, in never correcting their tendency to choose against their own interests. Imagine the damage done to a child if the central principle of that child’s parent is to give the child everything he wants.

One’s attitude in telling someone they are wrong is crucial. It can be said with an attitude of smug self-righteousness or with an attitude of compassion and love. Peter says it with the latter. He even attempts to mollify the harshness of his words of rebuke by telling them, **“I know that you acted in ignorance”** (v. 17). There is a way to be gentle at the same time you are being direct. Peter’s gentleness undoubtedly came from his remembrance of the way he had denied Jesus. He calls them “brothers” because he affirms that his nature is the same as theirs. The only difference between them is God’s mercy toward Peter, a mercy that is available to them as well.

I came across a quote this week that captures this well. Dane Ortlund said, “It is the most counter-intuitive aspect of Christianity, that we are declared right with God not once we begin to get our act together but once we collapse into honest acknowledgement that we never will.”

IV. Healing

Wounding is done like that of the surgeon, in order to bring healing. Peter points out how this was God’s plan all along. Even the great tragedy of the crucifixion is what God foretold through the prophets should happen. When we repent, which means that we pivot from living our lives independently of God and instead trust in him, the healing grace of God pours forth. Peter lists three gifts of staggering proportions that God brings to us.

Through Jesus, sins are blotted out. William Barclay explains the allusion. “Ancient writing was upon papyrus, and the ink used had no acid in it. It therefore did not bite into the papyrus as modern ink does; it simply lay upon the top of it. To erase the writing a man might take a wet sponge and simply wipe it away.” Like the cleaning of a white board, the record of our sins is wiped away, never to be recovered again.

Second, when a person repents and comes to Jesus, **“times of refreshing ...come from the presence of the Lord”** (v. 20). The times before such repentance are portrayed here as times of parched thirst. We were created for Eden, to live in the presence of the Lord. To be away from that is like uprooting a plant from its natural home. But through Jesus, we can be replanted in Eden and know again the refreshing presence of the Lord.

Third, at the time appointed, Jesus will return and restore all things (v. 21). As we prepare for Easter, let that word “restore” sink deep into your soul. Jesus will restore paradise. We sometimes think of the resurrection of Jesus as God’s act to suspend his natural laws. The truth is the exact opposite. It is not the *suspension* of the natural order, but the *restoration* of the natural order. Death is not natural; life is. The gospel isn’t merely the forgiveness of our sins; it is also the restoration of life as God intended it.

CONCLUSION:

As we’ve already seen, after Peter preached this sermon, many came to faith in Christ. But there was another response as well. We read in the next chapter that the Sanhedrin arrested John and Peter, threatened them and told them not to speak of Jesus again. The devil cannot endure the exaltation of Jesus. At our Session meeting a couple of weeks ago, Steve Whitner made the point that this coming week, Holy Week, is the week Satan hates more than all others. It is the week of his ultimate defeat and of the exaltation of Jesus. He may launch fresh attacks, but we need not fear him. Instead, let us lift up Jesus just as Peter did. Is there someone in your life in need of Jesus? Pray for God’s work of preparation in that person’s life. And then as God gives opportunity, seek to connect that person to God through words that may wound, but ultimately bring healing.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Acts 3:11-26

1. Put yourself in the place of the man lame from birth who was healed (3:1-10). What were some of the things he must have experienced both before his healing and afterwards?
2. This lame man, prior to his healing, is a picture of what our life is like without God. What do we learn about someone's life apart from Christ from this man?
3. If the healing of the man born lame is a glimpse of God's future kingdom, what do we learn about that kingdom from this?
4. Peter seeks to connect his hearers to Jesus and not himself, refusing to take credit for this miracle (v. 12). What are some practical ways we can seek to connect others to God in the normal course of life?
5. Like a good surgeon, Peter wounds in order to heal. He points out how they acted against their own best interests in calling for the crucifixion of Jesus, the Author of life. Can you think of some ways that we act against our own best interests when we sin?
6. Peter lists three significant gifts that come with repentance and faith. Can you think of the practical difference each of these three make in your current life?
 - sins blotted out
 - times of refreshing come from the presence of the Lord
 - the return of Jesus to restore all things
7. Is there an unbeliever in your life that you long to see come to faith in Jesus? Pray for that person using the pattern we see in this passage. That is, pray for God's work of preparing that person, for a connection with God (either through pain or joy), the wounding of realizing that life is not working, and the healing that comes through repentance and faith.