

**Grace at the Gate:  
The Power and Posture of the Gospel  
Acts 3:1-10**

**Main Point:** The reign of Jesus becomes evident in the world as the church proclaims His *powerful name* and adopts His *compassionate posture* towards those in need.

**Introduction:**

Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 3. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 2 following the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John).

**Starter: Gospel words vs. Gospel deeds?**

There is a legend about one of the great saints in church history, St. Francis of Assisi. For those not familiar with St. Francis, he was a young Italian aristocrat who came from a wealthy family. He had radical conversion experience and ended up rejecting his inheritance, took a vow of poverty and began roving from village to village teaching and preaching about Christ. According to the legend, he and his followers went to a village where they ministered to sick and dying, sharing food with the hungry and so on. After they left, one of Francis's followers asked him how come they didn't do any preaching. Francis's response went something like this: "Preach the gospel wherever you go, and when necessary use words..." In other words, you evangelize by your deeds, good works, service to people, and then, if needs be, you mention Jesus. Unfortunately, this slogan has been wrongly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, who was actually one of the most influential preachers of his day back in the 1200's.

But regardless of where it came from, this way of understanding the gospel as primarily being about deeds over words remains influential idea even today. There are some Christian groups who argue that the gospel can only be good news to people if it actually addresses their physical and social needs. According to this viewpoint, reducing the gospel to a formula about how to get to one's soul into heaven while ignoring the physical and social needs of the people you are preaching is manipulative and demeaning.

However, according to the New Testament, the gospel is by definition good "news" – meaning, its inherently a verbal message requiring a messenger to use (you guessed it!) "words". You can't preach the gospel without preaching! So in reaction to the notion that the gospel is best preached not with word but with deeds, some Christian groups contend that you only preach the gospel with words and the focus of the church needs to be exclusively on people's spiritual needs. According to this viewpoint, to focus on the physical/social needs of people actually compromises the gospel and puts one on a slippery slope to theological liberalism.

So which is it? Is the gospel preached exclusively with good deeds or only with words? ***In my opinion, whats missing in the conversation is how the good news of Jesus (the gospel) is not just a scheme for how you get to heaven, but an announcement about the kingdom which God has promised to His people – a new creation, wherein we will have new resurrected bodies and new spiritual relationships with each other and with God. The new creation – the kingdom of God - will be very physical and very spiritual existence.*** In our text from Acts this morning, we will see how Peter and John bear witness to this kingdom – to the new creation - in both word and deed by proclaiming both the powerful name of Jesus and adopting His compassionate posture [towards those who are suffering]. Throughout Acts, we will see that invisible, spiritual kingdom of God becoming visible in concrete, physical ways through the preaching and teaching of the Apostles. As we think about the mission of the church, we need to be careful not to make a false dichotomy between the preaching of the gospel and meeting the urgent, physical needs of suffering people.

**Setting the Context:**

In Luke 7, we are told of an encounter between the Lord Jesus and some disciples of John the Baptist. At this time, John had been imprisoned under Herod for some time. It's quite possible he had grown discouraged with what seemed like a lack of urgency on the part of Jesus to get His kingdom program going in the direction John thought it should go. And so John sends some of his followers to Jesus to inquire if He really is the Messiah or not. Here is how Jesus responds: Luke 7:20-23 - Like so many others, John too had a different understanding of what a Messiah-King should be doing than what was actually happening with Jesus. Now, its important to note that Jesus doesn't just pull these qualities out of thin air. Rather they are an echo of what the prophet Isaiah predicted would happen when God's people would come of out of their time of exile in Babylon and return to the land: total and complete physical and spiritual restoration.

Isa. 35:1-6a; 10 - This biblical restoration of the creation is commonly called *new creation*; that, the signs that God's kingdom has come will be a total makeover of the created order which will finally reflect His original intentions, for both the land of Israel and the created order as a whole.

**New Creation:**

***The promise of God to renew both Israel and all of creation by transforming them into a dwelling place for His presence and glory (like Eden).***

So, in Luke 7, the Lord Jesus announces that the signs of this kingdom-restoration, this new creation is now happening in the present-time through Him! Jesus is God's presence, literally, walking on the earth again just as He did in Eden.

Fast-forward to the book of Acts:

- Jesus suffers and is crucified as a false Messiah.
- However, three days later Jesus appears to His disciples – fully resurrected and alive again.
- For the next 40 days, teaches about the coming kingdom of God, and tells His disciples that they will soon be receiving the Spirit – just as the prophets in the Old Testament had foretold would happen and John the Baptist promised.
- And so the question then is asked by the disciples – which is basically the same question that John the Baptist asked in Luke: will at is this the time the kingdom be restored to Israel? And, as usual, Jesus answers this question by redirecting their focus to the mission He wants to send them on: to be His witnesses from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and the ends of the earth!
- Jesus then ascends back into the heavens, where He is now seated at God's right hand. An angel appears to the disciples and informs them He will return in the same manner He departed.
- While waiting, the disciples fill the vacancy left by Judas, bringing them back to 12 apostles, who constitute a new Israel, or restored Israel.
- Days later, they are filled with the Spirit on Pentecost, which fulfills a number of prophecies in the Old Testament. Peter preaches and 3,000 are converted and the church is birthed.
- Last week, we heard how this new community exists together in fellowship, teaching, mutual care, and growth.

Lets turn to chapter 3 and see how this new-creation, kingdom will become a reality through the Apostles...

Acts 3:1-3 - Let's pause right here for just a moment. Luke is a detailed historian, and as we have seen so far in our study, every detail matters. The focus of the narrative continues to be on Peter and John and their ministry. Luke tells us that they have gone to the Temple for prayer (9<sup>th</sup> hour, probably 3:00 PM) where they

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encounter a man who has been a cripple from birth begging for money. What is the significance of the Temple and a crippled man being there?

**First, the significance of the temple.** Now, so far everything the apostles have been experiencing occurs under the shadow of the Temple. They prayed and waited for the Spirit, they replaced Judas, and experienced the day of Pentecost, all within walking distance of the Temple. This is no accident on the part of Luke. Here's why:

#### *Background of the temple*

In the Old Testament and Jewish thought, Temple embodies the unique dwelling place of God's presence; it is the place where He has promised to put His "name" (Deuteronomy 12). By "name", we mean His unique, saving and relational presence with Israel. The Temple the physical symbol of God dwelling in the land of promise with the people; its how the Jewish people knew God was "with them". When the Temple was dedicated, King Solomon, who David's heir, prayed this prayer:

2 Chronicles 6:18-21 - Now, look how forgiveness takes on both physical and spiritual characteristics.

Now, throughout this passage the "forgiveness" extends to:

*Vindicating the righteous (22-23)*

*Give agricultural blessings (26-31)*

*Answering the prayers of foreigners (31-33)*

*Deliver from enemies, restore the people in the land (34-40)*

Now in the next chapter, after God fills the temple with His glory, God responds to Solomon's prayer: 2 Chronicles 7:14-16

Do you remember what happened to Solomon's Temple? In 586, Babylon invaded, burned the temple and took the people captive. For the Jews who witnessed this atrocity, it was like God leaving their land – the ultimate act of judgement. However, the Jews who go into exile in Babylon remember the promise made with Solomon. And so you have these rich prayers of repentance from Old Testament saints like Daniel, who plead on behalf of the people for God to forgive them of their sins and bring them back to the land and restore the temple.

Well, a generation later, God does this very thing: under the leadership of people like Ezra and Nehemiah, the people are brought back to the land and a new temple is built. However, there is not any instance in the Old Testament or other Jewish literature of the Temple becoming filled with the presence of God as it had been under Solomon. Nor did this second Temple fit the descriptions that the prophets had envisioned for what would happen when the nation would return from exile.

So for generations, you have the people praying and anticipating the Messiah who would rebuild the Temple, and God's promised return to dwell among the people and bring about the new creation prophesied in Isaiah 35. Isaiah 2:2-3, Isaiah 27:6, 13, Isaiah 66:22-23

***In Old Testament prophecy, the Temple would be the center of God's new creation and the coming Messianic kingdom. Second, the crippled man.***

So this would make sense why this crippled man is hanging around the temple...

The gate they go through is called "Beautiful" (the only time this gate is mentioned in antiquity). Most scholars believe it was the main gate called Nicanor, which would have led to the courts of the Gentiles. This was a popular time for worship, so there would have been large crowds. Luke says he has been crippled since

birth, which tells us something of what this man probably felt like and what his status in Jewish society probably was. According to Greco-Roman norms (Greek/Roman culture), it was a sign of weakness to be lame, deficient in the body. In Jewish tradition, it was often seen as a curse. Thinking of this man as an individual, you can only imagine the kind of shame, embarrassment and helplessness he felt day in and day out as he begged for help.

However, since giving alms to the poor was deeply embedded in Judaism, he stays at the temple and begs each day. And given what we have learned about the prophetic significance of the temple, this makes perfect sense: the temple is the place where God's name/presence would dwell, where the Messiah would one day rule, and from where God's new creation and healing power would emanate – was the one place he assumed he might find mercy.

### **The Healing**

As Peter and John are passing by, this crippled man asks them for assistance. But, as we will soon see, Peter gives this man much, much more than simply financial assistance. Acts 2:4-10 - This is the first recorded miracle that we have in Acts by the Apostles themselves. Again, let's pay attention to Luke's details:

#### **First, Peter's miracle occurs in the "name" of Jesus**

Earlier in the gospel accounts, Jesus teaches His followers that when He departs they will learn to ask for things from the Father in Jesus's name. In other words, Jesus would become the new authority by which His people were to pray, preach, and live. To get to God, you go through Jesus the Son, who has been given all authority over heaven and earth. Here, we find Peter and John now exercising the authority of the risen Jesus Himself. So it's not Peter's power that heals this man, but it's Jesus's power working through Peter that performs this miracle. More so, the "name" of God is now associated with the Lord Jesus!

#### **Second, Peter's miracle restores the crippled man to "life"**

Like we have seen with the Lord Jesus Himself, this man's healing is immediate, whole, and leaves people in wonder and amazed at what God seems to be doing! He is not only able to walk again, but He is leaping and praising God. He has been brought back to "life." Again, pay attention to the way Luke describes this man's healing: raised up (resurrection), limbs made strong, walking, leaping, praising God. These are all signs of God's new creation at work in the present time!

Isaiah 35:6 - This physical healing results for him in a new relationship with God, and becomes physical evidence that God's presence and His kingdom is among the people in and through Jesus.

#### **Third, Peter's miracle displays both the (mighty) power and (compassionate) posture of Jesus's new-creation, kingly reign**

Just as the Lord Jesus reached out and touched those whom He was healing, so do the Apostles. Jesus could have simply given the command to walk, and it would have been done (which in some cases He did). But many times, Jesus personalizes His miracles with touch. And so we see Peter doing the same thing here in Acts 3. By doing so, we see this man's dignity restored.

**Summary: *The New Creation which the prophets anticipated (evidenced by a renewed Temple, a Davidic King, and restored creation) is becoming a present reality under the authority of the risen Jesus and those who minister in His name***

**Main Point:** The new creation-kingdom-reign of Jesus becomes evident in the world as the church proclaims His *powerful name* and adopts His *compassionate posture* towards those in need

**Application:**

So what might this mean for us today, and how we carry out the mission of Jesus?

**Notes: Divided Evangelicalism**

We live in a divided era within Evangelicalism. On the one hand, we have the social-justice, social-gospel groups who really are wanting to make the world a better place but in doing so, largely abandon evangelism. Just this last week I listened to a podcast where a well-known New Testament scholar whose work I (mostly) like, say that evangelism is outdated and not necessary anymore. He said what's needed are Christians who will do the works of Jesus in caring for the poor, the marginalized, and downtrodden; who will speak out against injustice. The irony is that this scholar is writing a commentary on Romans! How can you study Romans and not believe that evangelism – the good news of Jesus – is essential to the mission of the church. The gospel – the preaching of Jesus! – is what Paul was all about.

And yet on the other hand, I hear other Christian leaders – in reaction to this – say that any talk about social issues is tantamount to liberalism; and the church should just stick to preaching the gospel and saving souls. I want to challenge both assumptions by saying that the pattern we see in Jesus, and in Acts, is not trying to make the world a better place – or saving souls for “heaven”, but bearing witness to the reign of Jesus, and the new creation and coming kingdom of God, promised by the prophets. A new creation in which bodies and souls will be saved and resurrected for eternal fellowship with God in a new heavens, and new earth.

**So what might this look like in practice?**

I want to give you two examples, one from history and [one] from my own experiences for how God uses the name of Jesus (proclamation) with the posture of Jesus (compassion) compliment one another as a sign of the new creation, kingdom:

- 1) The early church: did you know that the early church Christianized the Roman Empire within 3 centuries? How did it happen? As bishop of the city and a historian of the early church, Eusebius, recorded that during the plague,

***All day long some of them [the Christians] tended to the dying and to their burial, countless numbers with no one to care for them. Others gathered together from all parts of the city a multitude of those withered from famine and distributed bread to them all.***

Eusebius goes on to state that because of their compassion in the midst of the plague, the Christians' “deeds were on everyone's lips, and they glorified the God of the Christians. Such actions convinced them that they alone were pious and truly reverent to God.” A few decades after Eusebius, the last pagan emperor, Julian the Apostate, recognized that the Christian practice of compassion was one cause behind the transformation of the faith from a small movement on the edge of the empire, to cultural ascendancy. Writing to a pagan priest he said: ***“when it came about that the poor were neglected and overlooked by the [pagan] priests, then I think the impious Galilaeans [i.e., Christians] observed this fact and devoted themselves to philanthropy.”*** \* ***“[They] support not only their poor, but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.”***

In fact, Julian proposed that pagan priests imitate the Christians' charity in order to bring about a revival of paganism in the empire: ***“It is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism”. “I believe that we [i.e., the pagans] ought really and truly to practise every one of these virtues.”***

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- 2) When I first came to the church I served in Clay Center, KS, the pastor I worked with told me that our church had a reputation for being known as “the rich church on the hill”, and how he was trying to change that reputation by becoming more actively involved in serving the urgent needs in our community. Over time, the congregation really bought in to the idea that we are called to not only proclaim the name of Jesus but display the posture of Jesus by meeting urgent needs. Over the years we were involved with staffing an afterschool program for struggling students; we were involved with a ministry providing financial support to people who couldn’t pay bills and without shelter; we had a recovery ministry for people coming out of addictions; we had a support group for women who were escaping abusive situation; we had other groups for people going through grief, divorce, single-parents; we partnered with some Christian counseling agencies to help people struggling with life and marriage; we put on marriage seminars that were open to the whole community –all of which was unapologetically gospel-centered and Christ-focused, where Jesus was named and taught.

It wasn’t perfect, it wasn’t always done right, mistakes were made along the way; some people thought we were too legalistic and fundamentalist because of our insistence on Jesus and scripture. But I was okay with that; in fact I expected it. But on the other hand, one of the best phone calls I ever got was from a woman who said, “I was told that this is the church that helps people.” And I said, “We believe that a relationship with Jesus Christ is the ultimate help all people need – and we want you to have that first and foremost – but if there are other ways we can assist you, we want to do what we can.”

#### **Conclusion:**

Friends, as we enter into a new season together as a church, seeking and discerning the will of God for our future, I want us to encourage us to not fall into the trap of embracing unbiblical dichotomies between WORD and DEED, between *proclamation of the name of Jesus* and having the *posture of the compassion of Jesus*. So where in Salem/Silverton are there urgent spiritual and physical needs that we as a church can meet in the name of Jesus? Where does good news need to be preached and demonstrated? Where might God send us to be display evidences of His new creation and the kingdom that is coming?

So if I could reframe the quote by St. Francis, I would say:

***“Preach the gospel everywhere you go (Matt. 28:16-20; Rom. 15:20-21; Phil. 1:27) and do good to everyone you encounter (Prov. 3:27-28; Matt. 25; Gal. 6:10; Titus 3:14) that Christ may seen by all (Matt. 5:16; 1 Peter 1:12).”***

Let us keep pressing into the mission of Jesus as we see it here in scripture, and seeks to be filled with the Spirit so that we might be used of God as the early church was to turn the world upside down by pointing people to the new creation and the coming kingdom. In other words, that we would be a church that lives into our vision – that Christ would be seen by all!