

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 22, 2010**

WHAT I DO HAVE I GIVE

Acts 3:1-16

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

It is good to be back with you after a couple Sundays away. It was good to be away, and I am grateful to Pastor Bob and missionary Chris Furr for bringing God's Word to you the last two Sundays. But I am glad to be back, for the simple reason that I love you.

As you may recall, when we last saw Simon Peter in Acts 2 a few weeks ago, it was the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came in power upon the twelve apostles and all the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, and three thousand new believers came to faith in Christ in response to Peter's Pentecost sermon.

Today's Scripture reading in Acts 3 describes an event which took place not long after Pentecost. Let's turn to Acts 3:1-16 and give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED

In his book *Jesus Nation*, Joseph Stowell makes the point that God gives each of us opportunities every day "to demonstrate the excellencies of Jesus" to others, whether family members, colleagues at work, or strangers who happen to intersect the trajectory of our lives. He recommends that we plan to commit "one intentional act of [goodness] every day just to stay in shape." Then he tells this story that could be entitled *A Funny Thing Happened at Starbucks One Morning*.

It was 6 AM, and Stowell had just finished an early morning run. Passing the local Starbucks, he decided to stop in to pick up a couple lattes and take them home to his wife, who would just be getting up. Starbucks had just opened for the day, and there was only one other person in front of him. But this was not your ordinary wait-in-line-for-coffee drill. The guy ahead of him was in a tense argument with the barista. In loud and no uncertain terms, the customer was complaining that all he wanted was the copy of *The New York Times* he was holding in one hand while he was waving a \$50 bill in the other. The problem was that the clerk didn't have enough change yet to break the \$50 bill, which meant he couldn't sell the paper to this guy.

Stowell says it dawned on him that this was an opportunity, first thing in the morning, to commit an intentional act of goodness by demonstrating "the excellence of the generous spirit of Jesus." So, he said to the clerk: "Hey, put the paper on my bill. I'll buy it for him." That immediately defused the tension, and the satisfied *New York Times* guy walked away saying: "Thanks a lot. All I have is yours!" (Which, evidently, did not include the \$50 bill.)

To his surprise, when the barista handed Stowell his lattes, he said: “Mister, that was a really nice thing for you to do. This world would be a lot better place to live if more people were like you.” Stowell thought to himself: “If you really knew me, if you knew what I am really like, you wouldn’t say that.”

Stowell says he was caught off guard by the barista’s comments, and he knew he could say something at that point that would point the glory upward. But he couldn’t think of anything. So he made some self-deprecating remark and walked out, haunted that he had missed a golden opportunity to glorify God. As he walked down the sidewalk, it came to him. He thought: “I should have said, ‘Well, this world would not (necessarily) be a better place if more people were like me. But it would (definitely) be a better place if more people were like Jesus, because He taught me how to do that.’”

Isn’t that the truth? This world would be a lot better place if more people were like Jesus. This world would be a lot better place if more people, especially people like us who profess to be followers of Jesus, demonstrated the excellencies of Jesus by intentionally living a lifestyle of kindness and goodness and generosity in both the little things and the big things of everyday life. It is something to think about, isn’t it?

For Peter and John, a funny thing happened to them one day on the way to the temple. You know that Muslims observe the ritual of praying five times a day. Devout Jews in the 1st century observed three times of prayer each day. There was the morning time of prayer at 9 AM, followed by afternoon prayers at 3 PM, and evening prayers at sunset. Peter and John continued to observe these Jewish prayer times even after the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe “funny” is not quite the best word to describe what happened as Peter and John were about to enter the temple. It was an extraordinary thing. An amazing thing. It was a God-thing. They were minding their own business. They weren’t trying to draw attention to themselves. But there right in front of them was a man crippled from birth, so severely handicapped that he could not walk at all. He was totally dependent on others to carry him from place to place. And every day he was brought to the entrance of the temple area to beg from people going in and out of the temple courts.

Let’s be honest: What do you do when you see a beggar on the sidewalk? What do you do when you see someone who is probably homeless coming toward you? Most of the time, most of us do everything we can to avoid them, don’t we? I do. We try our best not to make eye contact. We try to pretend we don’t even see them. Like the priest and the Levite in the story of the good Samaritan, we might even cross over to the other side of the street in order to avoid a person who is homeless or hungry, or both.

That is not what Peter and John did. They didn’t try everything they could think of to avoid the crippled beggar. They didn’t avert their eyes or try to sneak past him unnoticed. No. They looked straight at him. They looked him right in the eye and got the beggar’s full attention.

Peter knew that the Holy Spirit was at work at that moment. Somehow he sensed that the Holy Spirit was on the move. Peter was in tune with the Holy Spirit. He was ready and willing to respond to the Spirit's prompting. I fear that we – you and I – sometimes miss the leading of the Holy Spirit simply because we're not listening. We're not paying attention. We're not tuned in. We're distracted or preoccupied with other stuff. Is that true in your life? Not Peter's.

The beggar was looking for a handout. What he wanted from Peter and John (and any other passerby whose attention he could get) was money. He wanted money because he thought money was what he needed most.

What Peter said to him was startling, when you think about it. He said: "I don't have any money to give you. Look, my pockets are empty. I don't have a nickel to my name. But I *will* give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ, get up and walk!" (Acts 3:6). Then Peter reached out his hand, took him by the right hand, and helped him to his feet. And walk is exactly what he did, for the first time in his life.

Some people may wonder why Peter reached out and pulled the man up. Did he have to do that? Did God need his help to heal the cripple? Or, did Peter himself have some doubts about whether his words were enough? The answer, I think, is that Peter's reaching out to help the man up was a gesture not of doubt or unbelief, but of love (John Stott). It was simply an expression of the kind of love that doesn't stay at a distance, but gets up close and personal. Just like the love of Jesus. And it was not the power of Peter that healed the man. As one Bible commentator said, the hand was Peter's, but the power was Christ's.

Peter himself makes the point unmistakably clear when he speaks to the crowd of onlookers who are just astonished to see this formerly crippled man now walking and jumping for joy and shouting praises to God.

Notice what he says starting in verse 12: "Why are you so surprised by this? And why are you staring at us as if *our* power or piety made him walk?" Peter wants to make sure there is no misunderstanding. He uses this occasion, just as he had done when the Holy Spirit came in dramatic fashion on Pentecost, to point people to Jesus. He said: "*We* didn't do this. *Jesus* did it. It is not about us. It is all about Jesus. It is by faith in the powerful name of Jesus that this man has been healed" (See 3:12-16). In other words, it is a God-thing. It is something only God could do.

THE PRINCIPLE

There is an important biblical principle in this divinely orchestrated encounter that can have a dramatic impact on your life and mine as we seek to live as faithful followers of Christ. The principle is really quite simple. Here it is:

God does not ask us to give something we don't have.
 What God cares about is what we do with what we have.
 God wants us to give what we have – everything we have – to Him.

Peter and John understood the meaning of what Paul would later write in 2 Corinthians 8:12, that if the willingness is there, if our hearts are right before God, what we give to God is acceptable according to what we have, not according to what we don't have. It is a principle with an obvious application to our financial stewardship, and the tithes and offerings we give to support the ministry of the church. But it doesn't end there.

Peter and John recognized that the only ability God really requires is availability. Did you know that? If you are available, God can use you. If you are available to Him, God has a mission, a place of service, for you.

Peter and John made themselves available to the Holy Spirit as they walked through the temple courts, and what happened? God showed up in a dramatic way. His healing power flowed through them. And the life of a crippled beggar was changed forever.

What counts in God's eyes is not what you don't have, but what you do with what He gives you. That is the point of the parable of the talents Jesus told in Matthew 25, about the man who entrusted some of his wealth to three of his servants.

What matters to God is not what you don't have, but what you do with what you *do* have. He is not concerned about what you can't do, but what you *can* do with the opportunities you do have.

See how this principle was expressed by Peter. Notice first that, even though he didn't have what the man wanted, Peter didn't conclude there was nothing he could do for the crippled beggar. No, he didn't have any money to give. But he sensed in his spirit that the Holy Spirit was at work there. And he knew that in the power of the Spirit, he had something better, something more important than money, to give him.

What did he have? Jesus. That is what he had to give: the power and love of Jesus. He brought this lifelong cripple into the presence of the Savior. And Jesus healed him.

There is at least one other thing Peter had. Listen to verse 16: "By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through Him that has given this complete healing to him [right before your eyes]." It was faith in the name of Jesus that brought about this miraculous healing.

But whose faith was it? Not the cripple's. There is not even the slightest hint in the text that he had even a seed of faith in his heart. Whose faith was it, then? It was the faith of Peter and John, and their willingness to act on it. They exhibited faith in Jesus on behalf of this crippled beggar. They believed God could and would heal him, and God acted in response to their faith.

It reminds me of the four men who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus. (You can read about it in Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; and Luke 5:17-26.) They couldn't get in to see Jesus because so many people were crowding around Him, so they cut a hole in the roof of the

house where Jesus was, and then lowered their friend on his stretcher right in front of Jesus. The Scripture says: “When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’” (Mark 2:6). A moment later, to demonstrate His authority to forgive sins, Jesus healed the man of his paralysis as well. Like the crippled beggar in Acts 3, he experienced complete physical healing.

But do not overlook this point: Whose faith did Jesus recognize and affirm? The Scripture says it was “*their* faith.” Not the faith of the paralyzed man. And not the faith in general of the crowd which had come to see Jesus. It was the faith of the four friends, the four men who believed Jesus could and would heal their friend and who acted boldly on their faith in Him.

THE APPLICATION: HOW DOES THIS PRINCIPLE APPLY TO US?

Peter and John gave a crippled beggar what they had. They had first given themselves to God. They belonged not to themselves, but to the Lord Jesus Christ. They had given themselves fully to Him, to serve His purposes in their generation. Having consecrated their lives to God, they were available to be used by God. And, when their lives intersected with the beggar in the temple courts, they gave him what they had.

What about you? What about us? As you inventory your own life, as you think about the gifts and blessings God has given you, what do you have to give in the name of Jesus?

1. Money

Is it money? Probably. The truth is that, by the standards of the world as a whole, just about every one of us – maybe all of us without exception – would be considered rich. Some of us are even rich by American standards. Money is one thing we can give to meet needs, to alleviate suffering, to overcome injustice and oppression of all kinds, to provide food and clothing and shelter and medical care for people who need it, and to support missionaries and missions all around the world.

You cannot say to God: “Take my life but not my money.” Actually, I suppose you *can* say it. You can form the words on your lips. But you cannot please God if those words express the attitude of your heart.

As important as it is, though, giving money cannot substitute for personal involvement if we really take seriously the needs of people around us and our calling as Christ’s followers to carry out His mission in the world.

2. Time

How do we get involved in a personal way? We do it by making people a priority in our lives. We do it by making ourselves available to people whom God brings into our lives. We do it by making and giving time.

Time is such a precious commodity. And so many of us never seem to have enough of it. Finding time to do everything we want, or everything we think God wants us to do, is a continual battle. I know. I also know that giving time is an expression of love. The time you give to another person, the time you invest in a relationship, the time you commit to serving in a ministry of some kind, is a way of showing love.

I don't know if God may be calling you to a specific ministry in the church (we have plenty of needs), or if God may be calling you to a place of ministry outside the church. Some of you already know where God has called you to serve, and you are actively engaged in a ministry where your passion and your gifts intersect with a real need. Praise God for that!

There is any number of places, any number of ministry opportunities, where you can give time – and love – and use your God-given gifts and skills to meet people where they are and help meet needs. Some of you are involved in the ongoing ministry of Koinonia in our community, giving help and hope to our neighbors in need. Some of you have been plugged in to the work of Sanctity of Life Ministries and the Alexandria Pregnancy Help Center. Some of you help to deliver Meals on Wheels to homebound folks in our area. Maybe God has placed you in a position to have a ministry of some kind with others in the military, or in some branch of the federal government. Maybe God is using you, or wants to use you, to tutor students who need help with their school work. Maybe God is using you, or wants to use you, to minister to our senior citizens in some way. Maybe the place where God is using you, or wants to use you, to be a blessing to others, is in one of our local schools.

God wants to use *you*. He wants to use all of us, to bless some corner of this world in His name. To do that takes time. Your time and mine.

3. Prayer

Another way each of us can bless others is by giving the gift of prayer. I don't know anyone who doesn't need prayer. Do you? I don't know of any time when it is not time to pray. And there is no follower of Christ, no member of His family, who cannot participate in some way in the ministry of prayer.

Maybe, because of your particular circumstances in life, you think you don't have much to offer in the way of service to Christ. But, if you can pray, if you can pray for others, if you can pray for the church and its ministry, if you can pray for unbelievers to come to faith in the Savior, if you will intercede with God on behalf of another person, if you will pray for the working out of God's good and gracious plans in the life of another person, you will have given what you have in a beautiful and blessed way. And you will have done something of eternal value.

Part of my calling as a pastor is to pray. It is part of my job. I actually get paid to do it! I get to talk to people about God and His Word (like I'm doing right now). And I get to talk to God about people. I get to pray *for* people. I get to pray *with* people. Including you.

But you can do it, too. In fact, you can do both of these things. You can talk to people about God. It doesn't mean you're called to be a preacher or a pastor, but you can talk to people about what God has done in your life. That is what it means to be a witness. And we are all called to be witnesses. We are all called to give a witness to what God in His grace has done in our lives. God can use you and your witness to bring someone to saving faith, or to give someone who is struggling the strength and hope to hang in there and keep going with Christ. You can talk to people about God.

And you can talk to God about people. It doesn't take a special gift to pray for people. It simply takes a caring heart. It takes time. And it takes faith.

Who knows? Maybe God will even use your faith to do something amazing in the life of someone who doesn't have a personal faith in Christ yet. Maybe God will use your faith to ignite the flame of faith in someone else. Maybe He will use your faith the way He used the faith of Peter and John. Or the way He used the faith of the four men who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus.

4. Jesus

There is one more thing you and I can give to others, and it is the most important of all. We can give the gospel. We can point them to Jesus, who, as Peter said on another occasion, has "the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). We can point them to Jesus, who is mighty to save, and whose grace covers us in every situation we will ever encounter.

Peter and John had no money to give the beggar. But they had something even more valuable, more valuable than all the money in the world. What they had was Jesus, the same Jesus I hold out to you, the same Jesus you and I together hold out to a world ravaged by the effects of sin.

Like Peter and John, we don't have the power in ourselves, or the resources, to fix what is wrong in the world or in the lives of people we know. But we know the One who can. We know the One who has the power. And it is our job, personally in the place where God calls us, and together as the church, to demonstrate the excellencies and the worthiness of Jesus.

INVITATION TO COMMITMENT

So let me ask you: Like Peter, will you say first to the Lord and then to a needy world: "What I do have I give"? Will you say that?

Will you commit yourself, or renew your commitment today, to give all that you have and all that you are – heart, mind, body, and soul – to serve God and His purposes in this world? Will you make God's mission your mission in life? Will you give yourself to show others what Jesus is like?

If you will do that, I'm going to ask you to express your commitment or recommitment in a tangible way today. I'm going to ask you to step out of your pew and come down to the front of the church as we sing our closing hymn.

Maybe, like me, you trusted Christ as your Savior and Lord 40 or 50 years ago. I'm asking you to step out and come forward as a sign of your recommitment to Christ today. Maybe you have never opened the door of your heart to Christ in faith. Maybe you have never surrendered your heart to Him. I'm asking you to step out and come forward as a sign of your desire to receive Christ as Savior and Lord of your life, and to give what you have to Him.

Come and join me here at the front as we sing the Hymn of Response, No. 379: "Take My Like and Let It Be."