

“Acts of Bethany: Reaching Judea and Samaria”
Acts 8

Attention: On the Love 2020 website, Ray Pritchard writes about Christ’s call to Compassion: One year right after Christmas I was flying through Atlanta on my way to Tampa to speak at a Bible conference. I had a few minutes in the airport so I picked up a copy of the Washington Times (December 26, 1994, p. A2). One of the articles gave a synopsis of the sermon on Christmas Sunday at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. The preacher began his message this way:

“This morning I want to talk about incarnation and children. But let me begin with the comments of a drug dealer to a minister. . . . ‘Rev, when a kid gets up in the morning and heads off to school, I am there. When he comes home from school, I am there. When he comes out to play, I’m there. . . . They know where I am, Rev. Where are you?’”

“Rev, where are you?”

“I’m a Rev. That question is for me.

“Evil is all around us.

“Where is the church of Jesus?”

“I write these words at a moment when our nation is deeply divided. We disagree with each other and

often we don’t trust each other. Across the political spectrum we are beginning to realize that what is wrong with America is moral and spiritual. I think people are beginning to see that it is going to take more than money to rebuild our cities and our homes, our families and marriages, and to preserve our children into the next generation.

“We need a new birth of compassion.

“Compassion means to suffer with another person. The word has a strong personal element. To have compassion means more than just feeling sorry for somebody. It means to get down where they are in the midst of their need and to suffer with them in the midst of their pain.”

Last week I reminded you of Acts 1:8 where, at the Ascension, Jesus said, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

This is fulfilled in Acts 2 when “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues.” V. 12 says, “they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “Whatever could this mean?”, and Peter explains, “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

When they heard this, many were convicted of sin, and said, "what shall we do?"

Acts 2:38-39 (NKJV) "Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

That was the first public invitation of the church, an invitation to repent and be baptized, and I want to make that invitation to you this morning.

We looked at Acts 2:42-47, and saw that Dedicated Devotion leads to the Loving Lifestyle produced by the gospel, and when you and I worship God by loving people and sharing the gospel, God will draw people to Himself.

I introduced you to Mission America's Love 2020 call for "a great movement of godly love in the United States and beyond. It is time to commit to follow Jesus Christ unreservedly and to share His love in deed and word with every possible person.

"Every person, young and old, in America should have the opportunity of being authentically loved by at least one committed follower of Jesus Christ by the yearend of 2020. Every person should know God loves and cares deeply for him or her."

The keywords are Pray, Care and Share.

In Acts 3-4 we see how the early Christians boldly told people about Christ, even when arrested, and when threatened, Prayed that God would give them boldness to continue to speak of Him and for Him.

In Chapters 6-8, Stephen becomes the first martyr, and widespread persecution begins.

This morning I want to invite you to look at how people were invited to join the church, and I'd like to invite you to join, if you have not yet done so.

When ch. 8 begins, we find "a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."

Acts 8:3 says, "But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."

Now Dr. Luke makes a key statement: Acts 8:4 "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."

The pain or trials You and I are suffering may be His way of inviting us to join Him in His mission of love and Grace to the world.

- This is exactly Luke's point.

A major purpose of God for those who follow Him is to use us to invite others to follow Him.

The mission in mind here is Acts 1:8, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.""

To this point they had been powerful witnesses in Jerusalem, but it is time for Phase 2.

In Acts 8 the church responds to God's invitation to Pray for their neighbors, care for their needs, and share God's good news with them.

Three kinds of "near" neighbors are pictured in Acts 8, in contrast to the "Jerusalem" ones we considered last week. These are all across some social barrier. There are three examples we will call the Poor, the Practical, and the Prosperous.

1. The Samaritans were spiritually Poor neighbors.

Philip, along with other Christians, mainly Gentile believers, was driven from his home. As part of those "scattered" ones in v. 4, he was called to extend God's invitation to others who had been impoverished and dispossessed.

Acts 8:5-6 "Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the mul-

titudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did."

The Samaritans were Rejects to Jerusalem Jews. They were Jews, but not accepted by the elite. They were spiritually poor.

They were the Aliens, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed, the marginalized.

When You and I have been rejected, it should teach us to look for others that have been rejected. God has given you empathy for them!

Phillip shows genuine godly care for them, and he "preached Christ to them."

The Result: v. 8 "there was great joy in that city."

When the Jerusalem Christians hear of it, they send Peter & John to check things out.

In v. 14-17, the Samaritans are given an outpouring of the Holy Spirit like that of Pentecost: "Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.”

This leads to other Christians later witnessing to the Samaritans: Acts 8:25: "when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.”

If you feel rejected by the “good people”, remember that God's love reaches out to the rejected ones.

Matthew 5:3 (NKJV) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Christians, who are the “Poor” God is calling you to invite to Him?

2. In Samaria the Christians also encountered “near” neighbors we will call the Practical.

The “Practical” neighbor is the one who joins Christ’s church for the “perks”, not out of his repentance for sin and desire for a relationship with God.

The “Practical”, Prosperity Christian took shape as a guy named Simon the Sorcerer.

Acts 8:9-11 (NKJV) “there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria,

claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time.”

When you tell others about Jesus, there will be some with alternatives, like the "Moderates" the prosperity teachers, the cults and the New Agers.

This includes the increasingly popular wiccan.

Simon was probably more like Christian groups who have a fascination with supernatural gifts or a prosperity, health & wealth gospel.

Simon joins the new church: Acts 8:13: "Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.”

The latter is the clue to what was wrong. He was in it for the miracles and signs.

Peter sees thru it: Acts 8:18-23 (ESV) “Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, “Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with

money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”

“Bitterness” equaled going after other Gods in the Old Testament .

The call of Christ is a call to follow him from your heart, and it demands a parting from the old ways of following God.

Do you have such motives for which you need to repent?

It appears that Simon did not repent: v. 24
"Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”

This is not a Prayer of Repentance, but of Regret.

Trans: But the invitation of Christ extends to those trusting in the “Practical” as well as the “Poor”.

3. The third near neighbor is a “Prosperous” one.

Acts 8:26-27 (NKJV) “Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship”.

He was a near neighbor because he was a believer, though not racially a Jew.

He “had gone to Jerusalem to worship.”

You and I may be distracted by the fact that He was probably black.

We should pause to be reminded that the church is multi-racial. There should be a brotherhood between races in the church.

But for Philip, a bigger issue may have been that the Ethiopian was one of the Prosperous.

- He was wealthy, for he owned a scroll, and as an outsider, probably had to pay more.

- He was a diplomat. Philip did not get in the chariot until he was invited.

You may find yourself given an opportunity to pray, show care for and share your story with one of the Prosperous in money, power or fame.

Will wealth, power or influence tie your tongue?

The gospel has often been “the great leveler.”

Remember we are all sinners in need of the good news of God's Grace.

The Ethiopian asks a question about a passage in Isaiah: v. 32-35 “

Acts 8:32-35 (NKJV) The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth." So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.”

When Philip tells him of Jesus, he asks to be baptized immediately! Acts 8:36 (ESV) “And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” [v. 37 was probably not part of the original]

And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord

carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.”

- That is the normal N.T. response.

You don't have to be someone's equal economically or socially to tell them your story.

- After all, you represent ultimate royalty!

Tradition tells us that Queen Candace was converted to Christ through the eunuch's testimony, and that her conversion caused her to use her office to promote Christianity in Ethiopia and the surrounding countries. She and her husband reigned c. 25-41 A.D.

Action: As we have examined this stage of the birth of the church, have you seen yourself in the mirror?

I invite you this morning to repent of all in which you have trusted before, and declare it publicly in baptism and church membership.

“What hinders you from being baptized?”

If you are a member here, I ask you, “Has God brought someone to mind; one of the spiritually “Poor’, or ‘Practical’, or someone Prosperous?”

The most important missionary journey a person can make is to walk next door.

Care enough for that person to begin to pray for them, & look for an opportunity to show you care and to share your story.

Ray Pritchard ends his article with these words: “Many of us would like a personal ministry, but we don’t know where to begin. There are people in your life who need the help only you can give. Some of them need a word of encouragement, and you are the only one who can give them that word. Some of them are staggering beneath a heavy load, and you are the only one who can lift that burden from their shoulders. Some of them are about to quit, and you are the only one who can keep them in the race. Some of them have been hit with an incredible string of trials, and you are the only one who can help them keep going.”

“Those people are all around you. Your only problem is that you don’t see them. Pray that God will give you Missionary Eyes. Those are eyes that see the real needs of the people you meet. Pray that God will bring at least one person across your path who needs the help only you can give. That’s a prayer God will answer, for there are folks all around you who are just barely making it. You see them where you work, and you live next door to them. Your children go to school with their children. They are out there waiting for someone to give them help. God has helped us for a purpose: that we might take what

we have received and share it with those who desperately need it.”

“How do you change the world? Not through programs and not even through preaching done at a distance. You change the world one heart at a time, one life at a time. Compassion that isn’t personal isn’t compassion. God help us to be men and women of compassion, to reach out and touch a hurting world in Jesus’ name.”

This week He may lead you and me to someone Poor, Practical or Prosperous. What will you do? Will you be ready? Let's pray.