

# Walk!

Acts 3:1-10

June 10, 2001

“I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” This poor man, whose name we do not even know, became the recipient of God’s healing grace in Jesus Christ not because he asked for it, not because he deserved it, and not because he had prior faith in Jesus Christ, but because God, working through Peter and John, decided to heal him. This tells us a great deal about how God works in our lives today in helping us, in healing us, and even in saving us.

“I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” It was God’s initiative, God’s power, God’s goodness, and God’s say so as to who was healed and when he was healed. And it still is. The apostle Peter had no control over this healing; it was not his power, it was not his initiative, and it certainly was not his goodness. Neither shall it be ours. Even more importantly, it was not an act of magic; Peter demonstrated no power over nature and no power to compel God to act; instead, he was an agent for God’s good will and power. So is the church today to be an agent of God.

“I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” In the name of Jesus Christ, the apostle Peter addresses what has gone wrong in human life. This functions on at least two levels at the same time. At the most obvious level, the man was healed. At a more general level, the healing is a model of how God deals with us spiritually. Peter explains this to the crowd in the second half of the chapter. We can deal with that later. For now, let us focus on the reality and the significance of the healing.

The fact that Peter and John were going up to the temple at three o’clock in the afternoon, at the time of prayer, indicates the reality of their piety. God still wants his people to be faithful in worshipping him at the appointed times. We would do well to be mindful of that. The fact that the man had been lame from birth increases the difficulty of the healing and heightens the reality of the miracle. To have healed someone from a recent injury would have been less impressive. The man had been carried to the temple at precisely the correct time to maximize his exposure to the greatest number of people. We see the same thing today. People come to church seeking help. This timing also gave the opportunity to demonstrate the power of the gospel to the greatest number of people. So the stage was set for the man to get more than he bargained for.

As he had begged for years, so did he beg again, of Peter and John. It was the only way he knew. It was what the society expected. It was a matter of necessity for him to survive. So he asked them for alms. Alms provided special relief for the poor. The early Christian church picked up this practice and continued it. In some branches of the church, there is an offering taken after the communion and used for the relief of the poor. We continue this here at Grace Covenant with the Two-Cents-Per-Meal offering to combat hunger, the Can-A-Month offering on communion Sunday to combat hunger, the One Great Hour of Sharing offering to combat hunger and to offer disaster relief assistance, various Endowment Fund gifts, and those portions of our regular offering and budget which go through various local agencies like the William Byrd Community Center to provide food, clothing, shelter, utilities, and medicine to those in need. This is good and important work.

But on that day now so long ago, something strange and wonderful happened. No alms were given. "I have no silver and gold." But suddenly, beyond all asking and imagining, a gift was given. "I give you what I have." We can give only what we have. "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." That much, Peter and John did have. They could name the name of their Lord and Savior. They could proclaim the gospel in its power. And so it is that the man was healed. Notice that charity, while good in and of itself, is clearly not the main purpose of the church's existence. When we have it to give, it is good to give it, but that is not why we are here. That is not what we are about. We are here to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is who we are. This is what we are about. This is what the Christian church can do that no one else can do. We proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, crucified, buried, and resurrected.

Strangely enough, only one man was healed that day. Surely we must assume that there were countless other beggars at the gates to the temples. The point was not to bring healing to all but to bring all to the hearing and knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

How does this ancient healing apply to us today? There are several possibilities. One is to say that miracles never happened back then and that they certainly do not happen now. The people who say the apostles never healed anybody also say that Jesus never healed anybody, that Jesus never rose from the dead, and that it does not even matter whether he ever lived or not. Obviously, this is totally unacceptable to the Christian faith, though we learned yesterday at presbytery that it is being taught at some of our own seminaries. These people claim to know more than they know.

Another possibility is to say that while miracles did happen long ago they no longer do so. This is both more attractive and less attractive than the first. It is more attractive in that it admits the reality of the first miracles. It is less attractive in that it

raises a problem of having to say that they stopped. Does God love us less now than then? Were the miracles only signs to establish the authority of Christ and his apostles? Or are they ongoing indicators of God's love, mercy, and power?

Another possibility is to say that miracles can and do happen whenever and however we say so. This is dangerous, also. There is a temptation to reduce the Christian faith to magic. Magic is the attempt to control the forces of life and the working of the universe in ways that are beneficial to the self. It involves believing that if only we say the right words, repeat the right formula, and pray the right way, we can compel God to do what we want God to do when and where we want God to do it. This is not what the Christian faith is about. We need to remember that even Jesus Christ suffered and died. We need to remember that the purpose of prayer is to seek the will of God for our lives not our will for God's life. Yes, it is appropriate to make our requests made known to God. We are even commanded to do so. But it is not our place to try to boss God around.

Finally, another possibility is to say that miracles can and do happen whenever, wherever, and however God says so. I submit to you that this is the appropriate, Christian understanding of what is going on here. Miracles can and do happen whenever, wherever, and however God says so. Again, this happens on at least two levels. One is the physical, biological, medical level. We have seen people near death restored to health, life, and vigor, with no other explanation than the sheer grace of God. This does not happen all the time. Why, we do not know. But it does happen some of the time. For that we give thanks to God. For these healings we pray earnestly.

At another level, miracles of the soul occur. The lost are found, the distraught are comforted, the alienated are restored, and sinners are redeemed. And you cannot tell me that these are not bigger miracles than making a lame man walk. At this level, his healing and restoration is a model for how God works in our lives to restore our souls. First of all, God speaks his word to us by the mouths of ordinary men and women. This poor man was not addressed by angels. He was not encountered by the risen Christ. He was spoken to by the apostles, ordinary men on their way to worship, men who were willing to name the name of Jesus Christ and proclaim his gospel. For whatever reason, hidden in the mind and wisdom of God, God has chosen to spread his word through ordinary, and even contemptible, human beings. That is his plan, not ours. No one asked whether we liked it. Our role is to listen. God communicates the gospel of Jesus Christ, not only the content of the words but also the reality and the power of the gospel, through the preaching of his word. That was true then. It is still true now.

Second, God moves our hearts inwardly by the Holy Spirit. It is not within our power to believe the gospel even if we wanted to, and we really do not want to.

We would rather believe in ourselves. But God not only speaks to us through the proclamation of the word, but also works within our hearts and souls, through the Holy Spirit, to change our hearts, to convert our souls, to illumine our minds, and to turn us away from ourselves and back toward God where we belong. We cannot do this ourselves, anymore than the lame man could get up and walk. God graciously does this for us. He helped the lame man believe what Peter said. He helps us believe today the good news of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of our sin, and the promise of eternal life. By the way, there are two other options here. There are at least three ways that people respond to the preaching of the word of God. One is believing, as did the lame man. The second is with astonishment, wonder, and amazement, as with the crowd who witnessed his healing. This is not faith. This is not an adequate response. But it may at least be on the way to faith. The third way of responding is with anger, resentment, and rejection. That is what the authorities did then. It is what the proud and arrogant do now. We can always be disappointed by this response, but we should never be surprised or caught off guard. In fact, if preaching does not create this division, it probably is not preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Third, God stretches forth his hand and completes his own good work within us. The lame man not only heard the word, he not only stood in obedience to the command, but also, “leaping up he stood and walked and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.” Note carefully that the formerly lame man knew precisely to whom his thanksgiving was due. He knew that the God and Father of Jesus Christ is the giver of life and health. He did not thank Peter. He did not worship John. He gave thanks and praise to God. God’s grace elicited gratitude. Once God turns us around, once God recaptures our hearts and souls, God leads us into praise and worship. This is what we were made for. This is what we are saved for. This is the ultimate purpose of human existence.

So it is today that I join the apostles Peter and John in saying to all of us who are lame in the soul, “I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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