

Explore the Bible Series for June 8: Empowered to help

May 30, 2008

• *Acts 4:5-10, 12-13, 18-20, 32-35*

God is concerned deeply for the practical needs of people. Whether the need is caused by a physical limitation or handicap or some type of social, economic or political circumstances, God makes the resources available for the meeting of that need so the individual may experience fulfillment in life. God places those resources in the hands of those who profess belief in him and calls them to use them to make a practical difference in the lives of others.

Yet for most people, helping others is not a natural instinct. Some may even have the attitude that "God helps those who help themselves." They may feel the church should spend its resources on those things that will improve directly the proclamation of the gospel, which most often means improving the worship services or promotional materials to attract visitors.

Reaching out to the community in social ministry can be seen as unnecessary in light of the many other state and local agencies which exist for that purpose. Yet as one reads the Bible, one cannot avoid the conclusion that God expects his people to be his hands in meeting needs.

From the Old Testament laws which protected the weak within society to the ministry of Jesus who continuously sought to cure physical problems and raise the position of the outcasts, God's people are called to meet real needs. As the story of Peter and John in Acts 4 teaches, God not only calls us and supplies us with the resources to help, through the Spirit, he also empowers us to help.

Meeting physical needs (Acts 4:5-10)

Peter and John knew they had a story to share with everyone that would allow them to experience the abundant life which Jesus promised. Yet as they met a crippled beggar on the road, they saw that God wanted to change this man's daily life in practical ways and provide him with an even greater testimony. They knew that for many, including the man himself, this person's life was defined by his physical need and that need could serve to inhibit his reception of their message.

It often is truthfully said that you cannot tell someone about the bread of life when they are hungry for physical bread. Similarly, it is true that those who daily face real needs do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. A sensitivity to an individual's physical need can often provide an opportunity to address the person's spiritual need.

As already mentioned, Jesus provided us with the model of always seeking to meet physical needs. In helping the cripple overcome his limitation, Peter and John simply were following the example they had witnessed many times. God desires that his people never hesitate to do whatever we can through the power of his Spirit to be his hands in meeting physical needs.

Presenting salvation (Acts 4:12-13, 18-20)

While meeting the physical needs of people is important, as believers, we should always do so with the objective of sharing the plan of salvation with that person. This is what distinguishes the church from other social agencies. We have a message for the world which satisfies the deepest needs and longings of the human heart. In all of our ministering, we should make it clear that we do so in the name of Jesus the Messiah who offers

peace, hope and real life in the midst of our world of chaos to all people.

This is often the most difficult (or at least most neglected) element for many individuals. Occasionally it is omitted out of pride and a desire to look philanthropic. Often it is missing due to fear or uncertainty. Sometimes it is simply overlooked. Yet if we neglect to present God's plan for salvation, we miss out on meeting the most significant need in the person's life. And there is no need to feel inadequate or complicate the matter.

As Peter and John told their accusers, we simply have to share what we personally have seen and heard. Every believer has a story of how they came to know the truth of the gospel and how it has changed their life for the better. People can debate over theological arguments, but they cannot deny the experienced reality of our story.

Sharing financial resources (Acts 4:32-35)

While every believer is called to be a minister and witness, no one person can be aware of or physically meet every need within the community. Because of this, it is important to provide financial resources to help those we may not be aware of. These verses describe such an arrangement as those who had the financial means, brought money to the disciples so that they could distribute it as they saw fit. Some do not think that the church should be so concerned about money. Such a topic may seem to be too "worldly."

Yet the majority of Jesus' parables dealt in some way with money and the overall message of the Bible is that the stewardship of our financial resources is indeed a spiritual issue.

For others the matter of sharing financially is easy. In fact they gladly give above what is expected and see that as substituting for being actively

involved in ministering to practical needs. This perspective or attitude equally is flawed. We need to come to understand that as a believer we are called to share financially, witness verbally, and minister practically. Only as we do each of these can we claim to be fulfilling our call. And God wants every believer to know that as we step out to accomplish each of these, we go filled with his Spirit who empowers us to help others.