

FINDING GOD'S PARTNERSHIP**ACTS 3:1-13a**

What person has God used in the greatest way in the 21st century? That question doesn't make much sense because we're only 14 years into this new century. But what if I asked you, "What person did God use in the greatest way in the 20th century?" that might generate an interesting discussion. I bet Billy Graham or Mother Teresa would be at the top of many people's lists. Here's a harder question. What person did God use in the greatest way in the 19th century – the 1800s? Many church historians would point to a layman turned evangelist by the name of Dwight L. Moody.

Moody is a great example of a person whose availability was greater than his abilities. He's a wonderful example of what can happen when a person – any person – links up with God to form a divine-human partnership. Moody was born in Northridge, Massachusetts in 1837 into a very poor family. His father died at the age of 41 leaving young Dwight, his mother and siblings with nothing. Literally, the family was left with only the clothes on their backs. The creditors took everything including the firewood. Now, Moody's mother was a godly woman who wanted her kids to attend Sunday School. But they were so poor she made the children go barefoot as much as possible so as not to wear out their socks and shoes. In fact, when they went to church on Sundays, the kids didn't get to put them on until they were in sight of the church. Ironically, Dwight Moody went on to become a very successful shoe salesman.

He came to know the Lord personally through the influence of man named Kimball in the back of a shoe store. When you think that Dwight Moody probably preached the Gospel to some 100 million people in his lifetime, can you begin to imagine the spiritual reward Mr. Kimball will enjoy in Heaven? After he became a follower of Jesus, Moody got very interested in church, but he was poorly educated at the time – virtually illiterate. We're told he flunked his church membership class which is intriguing to me. Imagine making people pass a test to join KRBC? Novel idea! Anyway, he was allowed to join that church the second time through the church membership class even though he was kind of on probation because he was still so ignorant about the Bible. He completely surprised that church family when at the age of 30, he announced that he wanted to sell his shoe business and go into full-time ministry.

After preaching a kind of trial sermon, one of the church's leaders said, "I think you could best serve God by remaining silent the rest of your life." How's that for encouragement? Another leader told him, "I was offended by your poor grammar." Dwight Moody observed, "You seem to have wonderful grammar." The man swelled a bit in his response. "Yes, I have very good grammar," he said. Moody looked at him and asked, "What are you doing for God?" Apparently, the church leader didn't respond.

One day, Dwight Moody was reading on a public park bench while he was visiting Dublin, Ireland, when he came upon a statement written by a man named Henry Varley. Here it is: "The world has yet to see what God will do with and for and through and in and by the man who is fully consecrated to God." Reading that statement proved to be a life-changer for Moody. He wrote later about the powerful impact that statement had

upon his life in these words. “He said ‘a man.’ He did not say a great man, a learned man, a smart man. He just simply said ‘a man.’ I am a man. And it lies within me whether I will or I will not make this full consecration to God. I will do my best to be that man.” The rest is - as they say – history. Being a partner with God– whatever that might look like in your life – is the most exciting occupation you can ever have!

Today, I’m concluding a three part message series on stewardship as a way of life. Today, I’d like us to think of stewardship through the lens of partnership. Being a good and faithful manager of someone else’s property – which is the essential meaning of stewardship – is a very real kind of partnership relationship. God has given you and me the gifts of time, talents and treasure, but He retains ultimate ownership of those gifts. When we partner with Him in using those gifts, there are wonderful results. Here’s a couple of questions that end up having the same answers in the end. What kind of a person does God use to bless other people? What kind of a person does God partner up with in order to get His work done? Let’s look at a story in the Bible that helps us answer those two questions with the same answers.

1. God Partners With a Person Who is Already Doing the Right Things. (v. 1)

The first few chapters of the book of Acts tells us about the creation of the Church. The first Christians were all ethnic Jews and they believed their faith in Jesus was the fulfillment of their Jewish faith. Peter and John were among the first leaders of the very first church, and here we find them going up to the Temple at a set time for public prayer at 3:00 in the afternoon. Meaning what? It means they were going about the right expressions of their everyday, walk around faith. They were just doing the right things. You could say they were doing the things we all know we should do faithfully and regularly – things like worshiping the Lord with others, studying the Bible, praying, tithing, witnessing, serving in the church, helping others. What’s the point? The point is simply that as you obey God and serve Him quietly and faithfully, God will bring the right people into your life at the right time and will lead you into the right kind of ministry. When you simply do the right things faithfully, you put yourself in the path of God’s blessing and put yourself in a position of being useful to God.

When it comes to spiritual matters, some people never seem to be in the right place at the right time. They always seem to be a day late and a dollar short. They miss opportunities to be blessed by God and to bless others. Why is that? It could be because there’s just no spiritual consistency to their lives. There’s no pattern of doing the right things day in and day out whether anyone’s looking or not. Then, there are those who seem to enjoy God’s blessing and are always getting used to bless others. Why? They’re not doing anything flashy, sensational or terribly exciting. What you see instead is just day in and day out faithfulness. They just plod along doing the right things. But God says, “I’m going to bless and use that person.” God partners with a person who is already doing the right things.

2. God Partners With a Person Who is Willing to be Interrupted. (v. 2-3)

Why were Peter and John headed for the Temple? To spend time in prayer. Their goal at that moment in time was not to engage in some kind of ministry or to help somebody. But we read here about a crippled man who singled them out from probably a big crowd of people waiting to enter the Temple grounds. They were interrupted. How do you feel about being interrupted? Temperamentally, some people resent interruptions while others just take them in stride. You might be very goal or task oriented. You've got your list of what you want to accomplish in a given day; for that reason you don't much like interruptions. I understand. I'm pretty much of "a plan my work and work my plan" kind of guy myself. But I've learned over the years that God doesn't respect my precious schedule nearly as much as I do. I've had to cultivate a willingness to be interrupted, realizing that if I don't, I might just miss being used by God.

I'm not advocating that you let interruptions just run your life. We all need discernment, because some interruptions are just a waste of valuable time while others are divine opportunities for ministry. If an interruption comes in the form of a person in need, it's probably a God-arranged interruption. Some of us need to be less like Charlie Brown in the Peanuts comic strip. He once observed, "I love mankind; it's just people I can't stand." God partners with people who love people. God uses people who want to be useful to others. God blesses people who are looking to be a blessing to others. People matter to God – hurting, needy people matter to God – like the cripple in the Bible story we read today. God sent His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross and rise again for people. Your projects, your schedule, your goals and your agenda will all fade away. None of them have eternal value. Only people are eternal. If people matter so much to God, they need to matter to you and me. Does God have the right to interrupt you? He partners with a person who is willing to be interrupted.

3. God Partners With a Person Who Pays Attention to Needs. (v. 4)

Peter and John didn't try to escape or just ignore this man in need. Instead they focused their attention on him and, through the Holy Spirit, began to perceive the depth and extent of his need. Good stewards – people God uses to bless and meet the needs of others – have their own needs. Peter and John had needs in their lives, too. But good stewards never concentrate on themselves, but on others. They believe and practice the truth that it's more blessed to give than to receive.

It's kind of fun just to let your imagination wander a bit and imagine how Peter and John might have responded instead of how they chose to respond. For instance, they might have said, "I'm very sorry, but we can't help you right now. We have to go to church." Have you ever met a follower of Jesus who was so busy being spiritual or so busy doing churchy stuff that he or she didn't have time to help others – especially those with a big need? Peter or John could have said, "Why did you ask us for help? All these other people are here to worship God, too. Why don't you ask one of them?" Do you sometimes feel like needy people are always hitting on you for help and you get asked more than others? When God brings to you a person in need, do you feel blessed you can help or do you feel impinged upon?

Peter and John could have said, “You want me to do something for you? I don’t come to church to meet the needs of others. Why I come to church to get my own needs met. I come to get fed. I come to consume. I come to get my spiritual needs met.” Many people just think a church like ours just sort of runs automatically. The electric bill gets paid magically. Kids just get watched in the nursery, or taught in Sunday School or at Kids @ Worship magically. Greeters and ushers who intentionally try to make you feel welcome and loved just appear magically week in and week out. Somehow the work of God’s Kingdom just sort of happens magically without your involvement. Oh, no, I’m not talking to everybody. I want to thank each and every one of you who is serving, who is giving faithfully, who wants God to use you and bless others through you. You know who you are. But I am talking to those who are content to let others pay the bills of ministry both literally and figuratively. I am talking about those who bring a consumer mentality to this or any other church – as if we’re some glorified, spiritual Wal-Mart created to meet your spiritual needs. No, this church – like any church - was created to be a vehicle through which you can bless and meet the needs of others. Some Christians need spiritual exercise more than additional spiritual food. Most of us are educated about the things of God far beyond the level of our obedience to God. God partners with a person who pays attention to needs.

4. God Partners With a Person Who Inspires Hope in Others. (v. 4-5)

Did you see that interesting phrase there in v. 5? “So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.” (Acts 3:5 NIV) Good stewards inspire hope in other people. Whenever you meet a good steward, he or she has something of value to pass on to you. They add to your life instead of taking away from your life. Let’s face facts: they are givers in life and takers. The issue is bigger than money! It’s often things like love, encouragement, compassion or caring. Some people just give or add value to your life while others take or detract value from your life. Some people fill you up and others drain you dry.

What’s the evidence that someone is, by nature, a giver or a taker? If you’re a giver, people are going to want to be around you. It doesn’t mean they’re always asking you for money. You just have a way of encouraging, motivating and showing compassion to people that makes them seek you out. We sometimes use the word “charisma” to describe a person who has a kind of magnetic ability to draw other people to himself or herself. Sure, some people just have a natural kind of charisma. But there is a far more powerful spiritual charisma that only the Holy Spirit can give you and which you can, in fact, develop with His assistance. Good stewards are focused on the Lord and others rather than themselves. As a result, people will gravitate towards you and when they do, God will use you to bless them and meet needs in their lives. When your mindset each and every day is, “How can I encourage someone today? How can I move someone closer to the Lord today? How can I add value to someone’s life today”, you’re partnering with God Himself. You’ve become an inspirational person. God partners with a person who inspires hope in others.

5. God Partners With a Person Who Gives What He/She Has to Give. (v. 6)

Peter's response to this crippled man sounds discouraging at first, "Then Peter said, 'Silver or gold I do not have....' (Acts 3:6 NIV). But then comes the really encouraging part. "...but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.' Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong." (Acts 3:6-7 NIV) Good stewards always find a way to give – always find a way to bless and meet needs. Often, it's not money. Instead it's a note, a card, an email, a text, a phone call, a hug, or a word of encouragement. Are you a giver or a taker? Do you pour life and blessing into other people – your family, your friends, the people you work with or go to school with, your church – or do you drain the people around you? God never asks you to give from what you do not have or possess. God partners with a person who is simply giving what he or she has to give.

6. God Partners With a Person Who Realizes His Source of Giving is God. (v. 6)

Peter and John knew that what they had to give was from God. Healing power didn't come from them. It didn't belong to them. They had received grace and mercy from God freely. They were blessed to extend grace and mercy from God freely. One of the amazing truths found throughout the Bible is the simple fact that God wants to bless others through us. In most cases, how does God meet the needs of people or bless them? Of course, God could do that directly in any and every case without assistance from you, me or anyone else. More often than not, however, God wants to use a human channel to bless or meet the needs of people. God decided to flood the world but preserve His creation. He worked through Noah. God wanted to get His people, the Israelites, out of slavery in Egypt. He worked through Moses. God wanted to defeat the giant, Goliath. He worked through a shepherd boy, David. God wanted to restore the relationship between Himself and sinful human beings. He became a man Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus. God wanted to offer eternal life to people of every ethnicity – not just Jewish people. He worked through a Jewish man named Paul. God wants to partner with you and me. He supplies; you share. He pours it in; you pass it one. He creates the blessing, you're the channel of His blessing. God doesn't much care who He pours His life and blessing through as long as that person is consecrated to Him. God partners with a person who realizes God is the source of his or her giving.

7. God Partners With a Person Who is Willing to Try and Trusts God To Do the Rest. (v. 7-10)

Peter reached down and grabbed that crippled man by the arm and raised him up. But God had to do the rest, didn't He? I want you to notice the partnership. "Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong." (Acts 3:7 NIV) Peter had to act in faith and lift that man up. God did the rest. God did the healing, miraculous part. God partners with people who are just willing to get in there and try their best for the Lord knowing that He will make up the difference. If you want to make stewardship a way of life every day, you will have to learn how to walk by faith. God partners with a person who is willing to try and trusts God to do the rest – to do what only God can do.

8. God Partners With a Person Who Will Give the Glory to God. (v. 11-13a)

The text tells us that after the crippled man was healed, he clung to Peter and John. Literally, it says he held on to them implying that he didn't want to let them go. In addition, the healing of this man didn't go unnoticed. The whole city became aware very quickly that something supernatural had just happened. Notice how quickly Peter and John give credit to the Lord Jesus Christ. "When Peter saw this, he said to them: 'Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus....' (Acts 3:12-13a NIV) What's the lesson? What's the principle? God is always pleased to partner with a person who is careful to give the glory to God for anything and everything that helps to build the Kingdom of God through that person.

I invite you to use your imagination to picture something that actually happens in nature. Baby birds have to learn how to fly. It's not necessarily automatic. One day, three young swallows were perched on a branch that stretched out over a lake. Momma Swallow got alongside the chicks and started shoving them out toward the end of the branch – pushing, pushing, pushing. The end one fell off! Somewhere between the branch and the water four feet below, the wings started working. The baby swallow was up and off on his own. The same thing happened to the second young swallow. Push, fall off, fly. The third little guy was not going to be bullied. At the last possible moment, his grip on the branch loosened just enough so that he swung downward and then tightened on the branch again. Momma Swallow was not a sentimental sort. She started to peck at the clinging talons of her desperate chick until it was more painful to risk flying than to keep holding on. Finally, the chick's grip was released and those inexperienced little wings starts pumping. But they worked; they worked just fine! Momma Swallow knew something that her chick did not – that it could and would fly – and that there was no danger in making it do what it was perfectly designed to do.

Yes, birds have feet and can walk. Birds have talons which enable them to grasp a branch securely. But flying is what they were made to do. Not until they fly are they living at their best, gracefully and beautifully. You were created to partner with God. That's what it means to be a good steward – to partner with God. It's something designed into you and me before our birth. Yes, some of us try desperately to hold onto ourselves and to live for ourselves. We kind of resemble those pathetic little swallow chicks hanging on to a branch for dear life – afraid to risk, afraid to trust God, afraid to have faith. We don't think we can live generously – giving our time, our talents and our treasure to help build a Kingdom that will never end. We don't think we can live generously, because we've never tried. The longer we wait, the less time we have for the soaring and swooping life of grace that comes in partnering with God every day.