

Visible Compassion: A Call to Action

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[0 : 00] Imagine with me this morning a community much like ours faced with an unexpected crisis. Picture a small town where a flood comes in and floods homes and people are displaced and people are in dire need. But also now envision the outpouring of the surrounding communities as they come in and bringing food and bringing clothing and just taking care of them.

Now that's not just a story, that's a testament to how people can help others. Now we were the recipients of it twice in recent history. We know what it's like to receive help when we've been through a natural disaster. We've also been on the giving end as well. And we know that when we see an outpouring of love, when we see the vivid illustration of humanity at its best when faced with challenges, we see, I believe, the mind and the heart of God when we are moved into action.

Today we are in the pages of God's Word in the book of Acts chapter number 11. And we will be looking this morning, diving into verses 27 through verse 30, where we find the church in Jerusalem in a similar situation. We find that the church in Jerusalem will be going through a very, very difficult time, a similar moment of crisis. And faced with a prophetic warning, the church in Antioch decides that there's something that they need to do. They hear of a need and they take immediate action. Now this is, I believe, a profound testament to actionable compassion. In a world full of need, the question comes up, is our compassion as followers of Jesus Christ evident in what we do? Not just evident in what we think, not just evident in what we talk about, but is our compassion as followers of

Christ evident in our actions. And inspired by the early church's example, we're called not just to feel other people's needs, but to act on it through our deeds as well. Our actions in Jesus' name have the power not only to transform other people's lives, but as you all are well aware, it has the power to transform our very own lives when we open up our hearts of compassion and when we act upon what God calls us to do. And the question is, is our compassion seen in what we do in Jesus' name? Now let's take a look this morning at this visible call for compassion. Acts chapter 11, starting in verse number 27.

And in those days, and in these days, prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them named Agabus stood up and showed by the Spirit. So Agabus, the prophets from Jerusalem came. There is one who probably in their meeting stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, all the known world of that day, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, those church members within the church, this newly planted church in Antioch, decided that each, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea.

[4 : 20] This they also did and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. Now let's go back to verse number 27. Verse 27, there we see there were in these days, in these days when Barnabas and Saul were discipling, they were teaching these new believers. They stayed for a whole year there in Antioch, and they were teaching, they were spending time with, they were building up the church in order for the church to be self-sustaining. And we saw last week that God was honoring their strategy, God was honoring their work in sharing the gospel. They went around, they were talking to people in the marketplace.

And as we learned last week, where they went to, where they ended up in Antioch was over half a million. It was one of the most progressive cities. They were the only known city in their day that had their city lit up at night. Imagine, you could walk all the entire, almost four-mile stretch of Main Street there in Antioch, and you could see what was going on around you because everything was lit up. But it was also a very wicked city. There was a temple there, there was some immorality going on that was actually part of their worship. And here is where God placed His people who had opened up their mouths to speak about Jesus Christ in this very wicked place. But think about it this way.

They had challenges, but God blessed them telling others about Jesus so much so that people were coming to know that people were coming to Christ in droves. Many people were coming to know Jesus Christ because they saw the authenticity, they saw the passion in these Christians' lives. They were first called Christians there in Antioch because of the life they lived, because they looked like little Jesuses walking around.

They showed compassion. They showed love. They showed grace. They weren't putting people down for what they were doing. They were telling them, this is what Jesus can do for you. This is how beautiful a life of Christ can be.

Jesus can give you meaning that you are looking for in all of this stuff that you are trying. And Jesus is the one. God created you. God loves you. Jesus is the one that wants to give you a whole brand new life.

[7:19] And people were coming to Christ. And in walks one of the prophets, these New Testament prophets, walks into their meeting and he begins to prophesy that there was going to be a famine all over the world.

And he tells the time that it was going to be. And we wonder, well, there's a prophet here. Well, for one thing, the church, the early church was built upon the foundation of the apostles, and Scripture says, and the prophets. In Ephesians chapter 2, verse number 20, the Bible says, having built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Paul says, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone. So apostles and prophets were an integral part of the early church.

Our church, the body of Christ, the church universal, was built upon the foundation of the apostles who had been with Jesus, who heard Jesus, saw Jesus, saw the resurrected Christ, but also the apostles who heard directly from God, and they were instructing, and they were helping to build up the early church.

Now, eventually, the apostles and the prophets moved off the scene. Well, after all, you don't keep laying a foundation. Once the foundation is laid, then you begin with the superstructure. In the New Testament, there were Old Testament prophets, and there were New Testament prophets, part of the church as well.

The New Testament prophets were those who received and communicated messages from God. Often, it was concerning events, but it also could concern the spiritual needs of the church.

[9:22] The New Testament prophets got their message directly or immediately from God. Today, we get message from God immediately through His Word.

Through the Word of God is how we hear from God today. Now, there are some that I don't know if you have ever experienced this.

I know I have. It's almost as if I've been by myself, and it's almost as if I heard someone speaking. I'm not going, don't misunderstand me and say, Pastor, I had a vision, and he heard from God.

All I'm saying is, I've been in situations where it's almost like I could have sworn that I heard an audible voice. And sometimes it said, you need to call so-and-so.

And I've made a phone call, and someone said, who told you? And they were going through something extremely, extremely difficult.

[10:28] Well, we had a chance to pray. Well, that's God speaking. So, that's God's Holy Spirit. God's Holy Spirit is still in the business of impressing upon us and helping us and guiding us and directing us.

And so, if someone says, I heard from God, they may very well have heard from God. So, these New Testament prophets heard immediately from God, and some were foretelling, just like Agabus was.

We question, well, how do we know? Well, what do we see in verse number 28? Showed by the Spirit. So, the Holy Spirit of God is the one that moved and gave the foretelling of this event to Agabus.

And we know that, obviously, it was true because it came to pass. Historians tell us there were four different famines that occurred. One of these was during the time, as we see here, of Claudius Caesar.

And it was a very difficult famine. And Jerusalem was involved as well. But we have these New Testament prophets who heard immediately from God.

[11:41] Now, the Holy Spirit is sovereign. As we see in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 and verse number 11, God's Holy Spirit can give a gift to anybody. He gave severally, as He will. And God can still choose to give whatever He wants to anyone that He wants.

But the passing of the apostles and these New Testament prophets, from off the scene, plus we have the completion of God's Word, we no longer need to keep building upon the foundation of these apostles and these prophets.

Now, we also see later in the New Testament that we're told as well, in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, this is later in the church's history, we're told in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, verses 20 and 21, to not despise prophecies, test all things.

So that's the key. So He's telling the early church, don't despise prophecies. Don't tell someone, you know what? No, you didn't hear from God. They said, test it. Remember the Old Testament proof in the Old Testament?

What were they told? If something, now this will give you a little, if you think, or if you thought that you were called to be a prophet, you better think twice.

[13:05] Because if you open up your mouth and it doesn't happen, what was going to happen to you? You were going, yeah, you were going to be, that was your life.

God told His people in the Old Testament, if someone claims to be a prophet, and they say this is going to happen, and it doesn't happen, He said, kill them. Because God was very careful about who speaks for Him.

So here we have the New Testament. Agabus is speaking for God. We're shown here that He spoke, being led by the Spirit, and it also, it came to pass.

But He says, hold fast, in Thessalonians, hold fast to that which is good. Now while the role of prophets has passed, we still need to exercise wisdom.

We still need to exercise insight. Does what someone say line up with the Word of God? I believe today's church can learn much from the New Testament example, to seek discernment, to encourage, to seek the encouragement, and to seek the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.

[14:15] But in verse 27, we are introduced to Agabus, who gives a prophecy. And he says, there is going to be an extreme famine.

There's going to be a great famine throughout all the world. And then Luke tells us, this is when it happened. It happened during the time of Claudius Caesar.

Now verse number 28, as we've seen, has prophesied about a great famine. Agabus delivers this message to the believers in Antioch.

And in verse number 29, look at their response. So we have a New Testament prophet from Jerusalem, one of the prophets who comes, stands up and says, there is going to be a great famine throughout all the world.

And I'm sure he went on to expound about Jerusalem was going to be affected. Judea was going to be affected by it. How do the people, how do the church folks respond?

[15:30] What we see in verse number 29. Then the disciples, that is just a common word for the followers of Christ.

These were not the 12. These were not the official disciples of Jesus Christ. This is what Luke, the term Luke used to talk about the believers who trusted Christ there in Antioch.

These Gentiles who trusted Christ are called disciples. It says, each according to his ability determined to send relief.

when Agabus delivered this prophecy of the impending crisis that was going to happen and it was going to affect their Jewish brothers and sisters in the Jerusalem church, they don't hesitate.

They don't put together a committee and they don't talk about it for three months. They decide to do something about it. They immediately decided to help.

[16:35] So their response, I believe, is a hallmark of what it means to follow Christ. We hear a need and we meet a need. Just this morning, we were talking about a need that we have been made aware of.

We have a missionary family that we support. And we've been praying for their two young people to receive visas to be able to come to the United States, to come to Bible College, because both of them plan on going back to the Philippines to serve in the Philippines.

The sister got her visa during the past semester and the brother finally got his visa and so he hit the ground there in Ohio and now he as well is in Bible College.

Well, as everybody knows, any of you who have ever been away from home at college and you are an 18-year-old, you get hungry.

And they're not allowed to work on campus because of their visa. And so we've been made aware that they have some need for some spending money, just some necessities, as our missionary put it.

[18:07] So we're going to send some help. If any of you have been on the receiving end, you know what it means when you're there. \$50 can make a profound difference to a teenager in college who is thousands of miles away from home.

So these believers heard about a need. Now, understand this, the need hadn't happened yet. There was no famine yet. The people weren't needy at the moment, but they said they are going to have a need.

Now, interestingly enough, historians tell us that there was a great famine, and Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that it was, the famine was so severe that people did not have money to buy the little bit of food that was left, and many people died.

No money, no food, and they died. And so the church members here decided, we got to do something. Now, let's pause for a moment.

These were Gentiles, not Jews. They were in the big city. Last week we talked that probably today, by comparison, it would be, Antioch would have been like the New York City of our day.

[19:36] And so imagine this brand new church plant in New York City who knows nothing about people from rural America, which Jerusalem wasn't that rural, but they said, you know what?

We heard that our brothers and sisters in Jesus are going to have some trouble. We need to do something about it.

And that is what they did. They acknowledged a need and they decided to take action. But notice here, did Agabus say anything that Jerusalem church wanted help?

No. The Jerusalem church, it appears, weren't asking for help. And I don't know if Agabus had told them yet what they were going to be faced with.

But here's Agabus, he is miles away, Gentile city, new church plant, young believers, not even a year old in Christ.

[20:41] And what is their first thing they think of? We've got to marshal our resources and we need to help them. So the church members didn't wait for the famine to hit or for someone else to step up.

They took ownership of the situation. Also, Paul and Barnabas didn't start a relief program. They didn't start piling up canned goods in the foyer and said, we're going to send it by tractor trailer to Jerusalem.

Not that it would have been a bad thing, but they didn't start a new program. The thing is, the church members themselves initiated it.

They said, there's a need. Got to do something about it. They said, let's do something about it. And apparently, they all participated. Look at verse 29.

Then the disciples, the church members, these new believers, each according to his or her ability.

[21:46] So they all got involved. It doesn't mean they gave the same amount. Some may have been a little, may have been professionals and they had a lot of resources. They gave according to their ability.

Those that had much gave much. Those that had little probably gave little. And this is a powerful lesson for us. When we hear of a need, our faith calls us to be proactive and not reactive.

They didn't wait until the famine. They didn't wait until people were dying. They sent them the need proactively in order for them to have the help that they needed. It's about seeing a situation through the lens of what can I do instead of someone else should do something.

It's seen through the lens of what can I do instead of something needs to be done. Very often we hear well somebody ought to do something about that.

You know somebody ought to do something about that. Somebody ought to do something about that. And all the while the one saying somebody ought to do something about that God might be saying I want you to do something about that.

[23:17] I mentioned Moses. Moses tried 40 years before to try to deliver Israel from the clutches of Egypt. And then 40 years later totally empty of himself a shepherd there in Midian 80 years old about this time and God says Moses you're the one.

Do something. Now his first response was God who am I? And sometimes we may think well you know what I'm just a church member I'm not a I'm not a deacon or I'm not an elder.

What would God tell you? Huh? I made you. So Moses said well God who am I?

God said I am the one. God didn't waste any time trying to bolster Moses' self-esteem or try to say well Moses you know what you've got the no he said I will do this through you.

Ultimately saying I will give you the words I will speak through you I will give you the energy I will give you the power. Do you realize that many if not most of the world changing initiatives whether it be famine related water well related no matter delivering human traffic those who are human trafficked no matter what it is most of these initiated started by someone who didn't have a position but said I need to do something and I will and they got a few people who had the same passion and they got it started you realize there were some who went to their church and their church didn't want to get involved what did they do we'll do it anyway because

[25 : 37] God said there's a need and if you won't do anything we will and so these these folks here in Antioch said we've got to do something hey let's give so that each according to their own ability decides what they're going to give so the mindset shift from passive observation to active participation is what sets apart a living faith from a passive belief we may believe in God we may call ourselves Christians but I believe it's this mindset shift from observation to activation is what sets our faith or moves our faith from a belief to a living faith and we are going to do something about it they all gave each as much as they could notice it was not equal giving but it was equal sacrifice some of you this morning I don't know your financial position you might be able to give a thousand dollars to a special need and it might be a sacrifice you know it might be a kind of a sweating sacrifice some of you this morning fifty dollars might be a sweating sacrifice but it's not about equal giving it's about equal sacrifice so the focus is not is what on the focus is on what you can do with what you have it's about recognizing that everything we have is a gift from God we didn't earn it now maybe we worked hours for it or we did something but God gave us the air to breathe

God gave us the ability to do it so this principle of not equal giving but equal sacrifice frees us from comparing our contributions with somebody else it's not the amount that counts but it's the spirit in which it's given but remember it's not just equal giving it's equal sacrifice a ten dollar in the offering plate may just be a drop in the bucket but the thing is we don't compare it's the heart of giving that counts so this approach respects individual capabilities individual circumstances and it unites everyone in the common goal you know you've heard people say you know what it doesn't matter the gift every dollar that's given and that is true it's not the million and two million dollar those offerings to places or initiatives like

Feed America and all the others there are some who do that but you know what keeps them in action is those ten dollars a month is those twenty five dollars a month is those fifty dollars a month that end up being way more than the one or two big givers that is what keeps the church going as well and being able to reach out being able to provide it's a reminder of God's economy the value of a gift is not measured by its size but it's measured by the heart behind it so how do we apply that in application of this early church's example it's important for us to internally ask ourselves what can I do so we consider what's our abilities what are our resources what are our talents maybe it's a skill you possess because it's not just about money giving is about giving giving your time giving your talents it might be you're a mechanic it might be you're a carpenter it might be you're a computer whiz it might be whatever there's somebody that could benefit from your abilities your resources your knowledge or your talents maybe it's just simply the willingness to be there for somebody this shouldn't be a cause of guilt but an opportunity for growth because every time we get involved in what God is involved in it's an opportunity not only for us to help someone else but an opportunity for us to grow as well whether it's a grand gesture or whether it's just a series of small acts every single effort counts remember the kingdom of God is not simply built through giant leaps it's often through small consistent steps of obedience of love and compassion that we show so this is an invitation to be part of something bigger we hear of something we do something we have the resources we provide the resources we have the skills we provide the skills so next how do they get these gifts to the folks in Jerusalem let's continue let's go down to verse number 30 when the early church decided to send their relief to the brothers in Judea they didn't just stop at the decision making process they moved into action with practical steps you see it's about turning good intentions into concrete actions verse 30 this they also did meaning they all gathered their pooled what they picked up what everyone gave and he says and sent it they heard they decided and they did they heard of the need took care of the need and sent to fulfill the need so they sent it by the

hands or sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul see it's a reminder that our compassion needs to be put together and coupled with strategy something needs to be done so let's figure out how to do it and that's exactly what they did now it's interesting when Barnabas and Saul took this offering and they brought it to Jerusalem they didn't give it to the apostles to whom did they give it they gave it to the elders in the church the elders were those who had the oversight of the ministry the elders worked together with the pastor to lead the flock and were assisted by the deacons who probably the elders tasked the deacons with distributing this or keeping it in and taking care of maybe amassing a food bank or whatever however they did it these people in Antioch had the compassion actionable compassion that did something about it so as we come to our end of our journey in Acts chapter 11 next time we're together we will be in Acts chapter 12 we're left with an undeniable truth our faith if it's truly alive and if it's truly active our faith must move us to action we may think you know people need good drinking water water that won't make them sick so let's go build a well let's go dig a well we need to make sure that children who have no homes have a loving and caring home so maybe we need to adopt don't just say somebody needs to do something

God might be telling you do something the story of the early church wasn't just a historical account it really happened and I think it's a blueprint for how we as followers of Jesus Christ can also put our faith into action sometimes it's small sometimes it's a missionary needs something we send it to them maybe they need a computer maybe they need a vehicle we've done that before we've taken up offerings because a missionary needed a van to take more kids we saw the video of like 25 kids piling into a 12 passenger van you all remember that one and we gave for that it was a need we saw the need we felt the need and we took care of the need but it may just be something a need in our community a need that someone else has a need that one of you have here that one of us or corporately together we can take care of that need now what does this look like in actionable terms as we bring this to a close how do we move from being inspired by a sermon to living out its principle in our daily lives let me suggest three action steps number one identify needs in our community because in order to be able to fulfill a need we have to be aware of the need so be on the lookout what are some things that we could be doing there's one of the things we've heard another church in town is doing that we may be able to get involved in we have we have some children in some of the local schools that don't have enough food they may be filling up a bag of food to give them so they have something to eat when they get home just something simple start by opening our eyes to the needs around us might be a neighbor who's struggling it might be a neighbor who's sick can't take care of themselves a widow a true widow who needs some help could be a local charity that needs volunteers

[35 : 56] I know Abraham's tent is always looking for volunteers we know that ABC Pregnancy Resource Center is always looking for volunteers we may have other needs in our community or maybe it's a part of the community that requires attention remember action begins with awareness what about number two the second action step contribute according to your ability could be money could be time it could be sweat it could be material but whatever it is just as the early church believers gave as they were able assess what you can offer it might be your time it might be your skills it might be your resources but don't underestimate the value of what you can bring to the table it could even just be your presence you know that everyone that shows up for a work day is an inspiration we've had work days before and not everyone did the heavy hard work sometimes it's someone just going from point A to point B being the gopher well guess what don't underestimate the value of what you offer and there are some who can't make it what can they do they can pray so don't underestimate the value of what you have to offer the body of Christ and the world around us

God uses our availability more than our abilities we saw that this morning in Sunday school in the life of Moses God can use your availability as a matter of fact God's power and God's strength can be shown more in your inability than your ability because when God gives you the strength and the power to accomplish something people go man that's got to be a God thing God mainly wants your availability God wants to hear here am I send me and then number three engage in action together don't just be aware of it don't just provide the resources but engage do something together finally involve yourself in our community in our faith community in our local community whether it's organizing a group of volunteers or starting a fundraiser for a cause or simply engaging others with you in a particular cause remember we're stronger together as we are united doing this the early churches strength lay in their unity let's emulate that as well so in conclusion let our compassion be

our hallmark let our actionable compassion be what moves us now we won't always be giving we won't always but when we are presented with something we can do what we can we may not be able to do what someone else can do but we can certainly do what we can a church that reflects the heart of Jesus not just within our walls but outside our four walls is a church that we can be and in doing so we may not only change the lives of those that we touch but I guarantee you it will change our lives as well you know the old saying that it blesses me more than it blesses you or it blesses you more than it blesses someone else who receives it and in many cases that is true we receive the greater blessing by being the one who is able to be used by God so let's be the church that the early church envisioned active compassionate united in our mission to serve in the name of Jesus Christ so let's go out and be the church in action let's pray father this morning we're so so very thankful for the the picture that you've given us of what it looks like to be people of action and lord you've given us the model and lord as the early church we know moved from more of a having all things in common and ended up moving into more of when a need arose that they gave according each to their ability and even today father we are in such a rich land lord we still have needs lord we still we are still short of things that that we may need at times but i pray father that that you would help us to to always be moved with a heart of compassion even if that's that's not our natural bent i pray father that you would you would work that into us and i thank you father for for the generosity i thank you for the the willingness of our faith family to get involved and we thank you we praise you for it's in jesus name that we pray amen so you you you you you you