

Witness Through Service: Acts 9:31-43

Adapted from: Do The Small Thing To Show The Main Thing. Jeffrey Smead @ Sermon Central.om

How were you named?

Were you named after someone famous or maybe someone in your family lineage?

Possibly after a friend of the family or someone from the Scriptures.

Often we receive nicknames by family and friends?

Some good, some not so good!

In high school, a few called me "John 3:16 Salley" they did not mean it as an honor, but I was proud of it anyway. And then up in Minnesota, there were so many men named John among all those Norwegians and Swedes (John Johnson, John Anderson, John Swenson) that I started going by my initials. To this day, everyone up there only knows me as "JT"



We can be known by multiple names throughout our life. Today, I want to introduce you to a woman with three names. Her Hebrew given name was Tabitha, but to her Greek friends, she was Dorcas (both names mean "Gazelle").

Now a gazelle is a lithe and beautiful creature with stunning eyes and swift of foot. We have no idea what Tabitha looked like but to those who benefited from her love, compassion, she was beautiful.

Tabitha lived in the coastal town of Joppa, which is about 35 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Solomon used this seaport to receive the timber from Lebanon that was used in the building of the Great Temple. Joppa was also the place Where Jonah caught a sailing ship as he ran from God.

While we do not know anything about what Tabitha said, we do know a lot about what she did.

We have no record of her words but we do know of her work. Her life of servant-hood spoke loudly. Most theologians believe that she was a widow or was single because there is no mention of a man in her life.

Interestingly the Bible calls her a “disciple” of Christ. Women were always accorded special status by Jesus; something often overlooked throughout history.

- They accompanied him on his travels, learning from him and serving the roving community.
- They offered hospitality in their homes and were also financial contributors to his ministry.
- Women stayed with Jesus at the cross ... while the Apostles stayed in hiding.
- They guarded the guards at his tomb and they were the first to witness his resurrection.

As you read through the New Testament, you will see women also very involved in the global expansion of the church. In Romans 16 alone, we read of Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia (called an “apostle”), Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis. These last three, the Bible tells us, “*they worked hard in the Lord.*” (Romans 16:12).

But here, Tabitha was specifically called a “disciple.” And the disciples we know were sent out into the world to bear witness to Jesus. So how did Tabitha witness to her faith?

Here are the three ways Tabitha witnessed

1. She was a devoted **disciple**
2. She was a **doer of good deeds**
3. She **helped the needy**.

First, she is a devoted disciple. Tabitha stood out as a faithful follower of the Christ. In fact, she is the only woman in the New Testament who is explicitly identified as a disciple. A disciple in that time and still today is described as a learner, a follower who is determined to become like his or her teacher. Jesus said ...

A disciple is not above the teacher,
but everyone who is fully qualified
will be like the teacher.

Luke 6:40

One of the highest compliments that someone could ever pay you is to say, "***You act just like Jesus.***" A Disciple when fully trained should act just like their teacher. And that could be said of Tabitha. She was so valued by her community that at her death her fellow disciples urgently fetched Peter to see what he could do for her; did you notice they did not tell him in advance that she was already dead?

So Tabitha was a known Disciple of Jesus, secondly she was also known as a doer of good deeds. The needs of people not only moved her heart... but in turn she moved in response to do something to meet those needs.

She served, and the people knew it was because of her Savior. That was her identity..... She was saved to serve. A disciple is a doer of good deeds in the name of Jesus; the life we live is one that honors him.

For the love of Christ urges us on, because ...
he died for all, so that those who live might
live no longer for themselves, but for him
who died and was raised for them.

2 Corinthians 5: 14-15

like a Gazelle, Tabitha was quick to respond when someone was in need. She used her gifts, her abilities to further the kingdom. Scripture states *that she was devoted to good works and acts of charity* (9:36).

This phrase literally means that she was "full of good works." It was her holy habit to abound and to overflow with good deeds. Which is a Biblical mandated lifestyle that we should also be following.

whenever we have an opportunity,
let us work for the good of all,
and especially for those of the family of faith.

Galatians 6:10

During the Civil War there was a Union Nurse who labored among the wounded troops. Her face had been disfigured in a fire when she was very young.

When asked why she volunteered to work among So Much death and carnage,...she replied, "The wounded soldiers don't notice my scars as much as the others. To them, I'm beautiful."

Whatever her outward appearance, what Tabitha did is what made her beautiful. Tabitha served her Savior.... by ministering to those in need. She is the model of a devoted disciple who witnesses to her faith by doing good deeds in quiet, sacrificial and unassuming ways. There are many here within our church who do the same.

Tabitha was a disciple, a follower of the Christ, she was a doer of good deeds, and also she helped the neediest, of the needy. Widows in her day had no social security safety net; if they could not care for themselves, their care fell to their family, or to the church. Without one of these supports widows were desperately destitute; no other help was available; think of the OT story of Naomi and Ruth. So the Church from its very beginning had a vital ministry of caring for those who were forgotten by everyone else. As James the brother of Jesus taught us

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God,
is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress,
and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James 1.27:

Since there were no department stores in Joppa, making clothing was a task assigned to women in that culture. It seems that Tabitha was a competent seamstress. But she was doing more with her sewing than just supporting herself.

She's a picture of a Proverbs 31 woman.

She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.

Proverb 31:19-20

Before the invention of the spinning wheel, a distaff was the spool on the hand spun yarn is wound, it is also a euphemism for any job that is considered "woman's work".

Tabitha was a competent seamstress; it was both her profession and her ministry to the poorest of the poor. In his book titled, "The Conspiracy of Kindness," Steve Sjogren notes that while less than 10% of Christians believe they have the spiritual gift of evangelism, 90% feel they have the gift of serving. His church in Cincinnati does a lot of what they call "**servant evangelism.**"

What is servant evangelism? It is demonstrating the love God....by offering to do some act of humble service with no strings attached. This Cincinnati Church washes cars, cleans toilets, shines shoes, grills hot dogs in the parks, passes out cold bottles of water on hot days, all for free, no strings attached. They do it in the name of Jesus. And during these expressions of kindness, they occasionally earn the right to speak of their faith. Many people have been so moved by these not-random acts of kindness that they eventually come to church and accept Jesus as their Lord and their Savior.

The Small Group ministries of **Bedrock Church**, here in Bedford, practice this kind of evangelism year round. When they first came into our area, the pastors and leadership team of Bedrock visited all the businesses in town, just offering to clean their bathrooms for them. For the past two years Bedrock's Summer camp program has brought a busload of teenagers to town to walk around our neighborhoods, knocking on doors, and offering to pray for any needs the residents may mention. It is a very surprising thing to find a group of teens standing at your door, offering to pray for you – talk about counter-cultural; they prayed for me last year; I was very grateful. For those who are of the faith, Jesus gave us some very specific instructions:

***"let your light shine before others,
so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father in heaven."***

Matthew 5:16

Friends, as Mother Theresa both said and proved, "**Small things done with great love will change the world**".

As we serve others, the church is strengthened and the lost are drawn to Christ.

There are plenty of opportunities to do servant evangelism here in Bedford. Just last Sunday, Venus Gould shared how Bedford Christian Ministries was in need of workers in the food pantry, the clothes and home utensil rooms just to stock shelves and help the poorest of the poor – how wonderful such compassionate service on your part will be to those receiving it. For years, Becky Noell, Gerda Schubert, Sally Cram, and Mary Wilkes have volunteered and worked over at Bedford Primary School, serving both the teachers and their students in the name of Christ; I would hope to see twice their number in that school next year. What a great way to share your faith. Look around, there are countless opportunities both organized or very personal in which you can show your faith through your service to others.

Apparently Tabitha's unique compassion and contributions were so essential to the Believers in Joppa that when she died, God... through Peter raised her back to life!

As the other disciples brought Peter into Tabitha's room, *all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them* (9:39). The faithful in Joppa put Tabitha's deeds on display by pointing to their own clothing. The phrase "*tunics and other clothing*" in the original Greek refers to both their outerwear and their undergarments. Tabitha had made everything that they were wearing. They were literally clothed in her compassion.

This amazing episode in Joppa surely brought back to Peter's mind the experience he had with Jesus when Jairus' young daughter had died (Luke 8:50-55). Remembering what Jesus had done in the midst of all that grief, Peter put the mourners outside the room, then he knelt down and prayed. And turning to the body, he said "*Tabitha get up.*" *She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive* (Acts 9:41).

Jesus through Peter had raised Tabitha from the dead.

We do not hear what happens next yet I am sure that after she regained her strength, Tabitha returned to her quiet and unassuming service.

Friends, **miracles** always magnify God and always work to spread the good news of His glory. Tabitha's rising from the dead, just like Aeneas' rising from his paralytic bed, became known throughout all the surrounding towns. "***and many people believed in the Lord.***" (9:35, 42).

Miracles get people's attention, but in a quieter way so does **servant evangelism**.

You say you can't witness? ... but you can through your service of others in the name of Christ. You too can be a quiet practitioner of regular acts of kindness... just like Tabitha. Such service in the name of Christ touches people in the midst of their needs. Serving will break through disbelief and a helping hand can often soften a hardened heart.

God calls each of us to get up and to be involved in acts of compassion.... In servant evangelism. To do those small things that witness to the main thing: God's love.

Friends, we were raised to a new life in order to serve... like Tabitha. To be devoted disciples who are both doers of good deeds and helpers of the needy: the last, the least, the lost. The true *measure of our faith is not by what happens "in here" but by what happens "out there."*

No one can do everything but everyone can do something. We never fully know...what small act of kindness...will touch and transform a life. Jesus challenges us, his disciples, to do those small things that bear witness to God's Love.

We received eternal life not by what we do, but by what Christ has done for us. And the world now learns of Christ's love by what he does through us.

As Nike commercials used to challenge us: "**Just do it!**" Sharing Jesus in practical ways: with a cup of cold water, a meal, with words of prayer, a listening ear, a ride to the doctor, at Bedford Christian Ministries, at the Shepherd's Table, or at the Primary School, and in so many other ways, our call is to Just do it

Why? Because Jesus our Lord and Savior... just did it.

He **died** for us, He **gives** us eternal life, He **lives** with us in the Holy Spirit, **empowering** us to live out our purpose... not only in the big moments of life, but in all of its little ones as well. For every Philip opportunity, for every Ananias or Peter moment, there are countless opportunities for those simple acts of servant evangelism, done in love, which seem so small yet when you realize that God is at work through them, they become eternally large.

Remember as Jesus told us: "Whatever you did to the least of these ... you did to me." (Matthew 25:40).

Let's pray about this.