

KNOWING & DOING

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Jesus' Loving Presence in the World—You!

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(An excerpt from *Tangible: Making God Known through Deeds of Mercy and Words of Truth* by Chris Sicks. Used by permission of NavPress. ©2013)

On the night before He died, Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). How can believers in Christ do *even greater* things than Jesus did?

The Greek word for “greater” is also used in Scripture to communicate the ideas “more” and “abundant.” Jesus wasn’t saying our ministry would be of greater *value* than His ministry. He was referring to the scope and extent of what He would do through us. Once His physical body left the earth, Jesus delegated His ministry to the body of Christ. This body—the church—quickly grew to include thousands and then millions of men and women and children.

Today, His Word is available in nearly three thousand languages, and there are over four hundred thousand missionaries around the world.¹ Christ is doing more abundant work today, more widespread work, through His many brothers and sisters. *The body of Christ is Jesus’ loving presence in every part of the world.*

Mother Teresa understood this. The world saw a love in her that grabbed their attention, but she didn’t want people to focus on her. She always pointed to Christ as the Source of her love: “Jesus went about doing good. And we are trying to imitate him now because I believe that God loves the world through us. Just as he sent Jesus to be his love, his presence in the world, so today he is sending us.”²

Whether God has placed you in the streets of Calcutta or the suburbs of Charlotte, you have opportunities to be His compassionate presence, to make His love tangible to hurting people.

What does *tangible love* look like? Think of it as *incarnate words*. If I merely tell a lonely widow, “Jesus loves you!” and “God is good!” my words are as two-dimensional as a bumper sticker. God’s love isn’t tangible until that lonely woman actually *sees* and *feels* love. There is a big difference between love as an idea and love in action.

If you are in a dark basement, the idea of light is no help at all. You need a flashlight. If your children are hungry, the idea that God cares won’t fill their bellies. Your family needs food. When God’s people provide food, hold your hand, pray with you, and give you hope, they can declare, “Jesus loves you!” with authenticity. But it requires the investment of our time, talent, and emotion. It requires our compassionate presence.

God Can Use You

*I believe more and more that this is truly the central task of the Christian: to give the Lord the opportunity to exhibit his existence.*³

—Francis Schaeffer

Jacqueline is a senior who joined our church after the deacons bought a bus so we could invite to worship the residents of two senior residences across town. Jacqueline is full of energy, spunk, and passion for the Lord. She has some health problems, of course. What eighty-three-year-old doesn't? A month after she had a hip replacement, the changing seasons hit her with a lung infection. I went to see her in the hospital. As we sat and talked, the other patient in the room, a young woman named Rosita, cried out softly every minute or so, in pain.

"It was really irritating the first night," Jacqueline told me. "But then I got up at three a.m. and spoke to her. I touched her face and prayed for her. Then she quieted down."

One of the nurses had come in while Jacqueline was praying for Rosita. She told Jacqueline, "Maybe that's why you got a lung infection. So you could be in this room, for her." After that, Jacqueline was no longer annoyed by Rosita's nighttime moans and groans. She realized she was there for a purpose.

The day after my visit, Jacqueline called to say her lung infection looked like pneumonia, so they were keeping her for several more days. She had also learned Rosita was supposed to be on another floor. "But they don't have space for her down there," Jacqueline told me. "Where?" I asked. "The *end-of-life floor*. That's where she's supposed to be. I don't know what to do, Little Brother." That's what Jacqueline calls me. I like it.

I didn't know sickle cell was a fatal disease—that it could take a twenty-four-year-old woman with a six-year-old son. Jacqueline was surprised too. "What do I say to her? I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

I told Jacqueline, "Jesus' body is in heaven now. He is using your hands to love Rosita. So just spend time with her. Tell her about Him, and let Him use you to comfort her."

The next day, I went back to the hospital. Jacqueline held Rosita's hand while I read Psalm 18. We talked about how encouraging it is that our cries for mercy reach God's ears—that God is never too busy to listen and respond to calls for help. We talked about heaven, and Christ, and salvation. And then Rosita smiled as she prayed to receive Christ. It was all God's work. He put Jacqueline in that room and brought me to visit. He worked in the heart of a dying young woman to help her see her sin and need for a Savior. God alone saved her soul. But He let Jacqueline and me be a part of His work (see 1 Corinthians 3:5–9).



Yes, You

Jacqueline was nervous about moving into Rosita's life. I'm sure many of you can relate. Perhaps you feel God can't use you in significant ways. Maybe you feel untrained or too ordinary to make a difference in someone's life. If you are God's child, however, you are an instrument He can use for His purposes (see 1 Corinthians 1:26–31).

Do you remember how God used a little slave girl in the household of Naaman the leper? Naaman was a rich, arrogant Syrian general. He had few concrete needs in his life—until he got leprosy. (Read his story in 2 Kings 5.) That tangible need opened the door of Naaman's heart so he could learn some intangible things about himself.

God's renovation of Naaman's life began with an Israeli girl, a slave taken in battle. She told Naaman's wife about a prophet in Israel named Elisha who could heal him. Naaman's first lesson in humility was to listen to the most unlikely teacher of all, a young slave girl. She was a messenger of hope to a man broken inside and out.

As bad as his leprosy was, Naaman's sin problem was worse. God used leprosy to expose Naaman's true problem—a proud, rebellious heart that needed cleansing. *Naaman's heart was as numb as his hands.* Without his leprosy, Naaman would never have traveled to Israel, obeyed Elisha's instructions to jump in the river, or listened to the little slave girl who told him where healing could be found.

Naaman was powerful and rich. The girl was powerless and penniless. He was a general with great freedom. She was a slave with no freedom. The girl had little of her own to offer Naaman. How about you? Do you know the Source of true help for the hurting?

At a time when Israel had abandoned the worship of Yahweh and chased after foreign gods, this slave girl retained her faith. At a time when Israel had failed to be “a light for the nations” (Isaiah 49:6), this young girl became a light of hope in Damascus. It wasn't her light. She simply reflected the light of God's truth in a dark place so that Naaman could see.

Are you outnumbered by nonbelievers in your neighborhood, school, family, or workplace? Remember that as a member of God's household, you are His instrument. You are not alone. Wherever you are now, know that you don't have to be a big shot or have all the answers to the problems of those around you. That Israelite girl did not know how to cure leprosy, but she knew where to point Naaman. As God's child, she was tapped into the Source of all healing and hope, and that made her useful to God right where she was. Where will God use you?

Open Your Eyes and Your Heart

God is calling some of His children to move overseas to bring healing and hope to the slums and dark places of the world. Many of us, however, are called to remain right where we are.

Perhaps you are living in a nice community in the suburbs. It's not wrong to live there. But it *is* wrong to let your comfortable life insulate you from the needs of people around you.⁴

Next Saturday before you take your children to soccer practice or the playground, why not ask God how He could use you there?

Maybe you are a student or work in an office somewhere. What if you prayed for the people you see every week and asked the Lord to open doors into their lives? I guarantee some of them are struggling with something right now. You carry the light of the world with you (see Matthew 5:14–16)! Don't smother it, because there are needy people everywhere, even if they don't appear to have needs. Nicholas Wolterstorff writes:

We live in a time and place where, over and over, when confronted with something unpleasant we pursue not coping but overcoming. Often we succeed. Most of humanity has not enjoyed and does not enjoy such luxury. Death shatters our illusion that we can make do without coping. When we have overcome absence with phone calls, winglessness with airplanes, summer heat with air-conditioning—when we have overcome all these and more besides, then there will abide two things with which we must cope: the evil in our hearts and death.⁵

Today, Christianity is growing dramatically among the world's poorest people. They know their need. The wealthy, on the other hand, often fail to see how Jesus is relevant to their lives. That's the point Jesus makes in Mark 10:25: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Did Jesus mean the door of heaven is closed to the rich? Of course not. The rich are just better cushioned from reality; they don't know how needy they truly are. Do you know anyone like that?

In His mercy, God sometimes creates a vacuum of need in otherwise comfortable lives. In that vacuum, many become desperate enough to shed their pride and seek a Savior. That's what happened to Naaman, who was cushioned from the reality of the world and the sin in his heart. But when that proud, successful man ran out of options, his hopelessness drove him into the arms of God.

I think the materially comfortable—the Naamans of today—could actually be another unreached people group, right under our noses. They drive expensive cars, wear nice clothes, and appear to be happy. But many are miserable. Driving home in a BMW or Suburban doesn't make it easier to face a crumbling marriage. Living in a big house doesn't help your teenager get off drugs. A large bank account is little comfort when Alzheimer's slowly steals your spouse from you.



Material comfort and earthly success can be like Bubble Wrap, protecting people from the hard reality of their situation: “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:17). To remove the obstacles of wealth and prosperity, God sometimes allows problems to creep into the lives of comfortable people. Those problems make them hungry for help and for answers. So open your eyes and your heart, and let God use you to serve those hungry souls the Bread of Life.

It’s Okay to Feel Helpless

Maybe you are unconvinced that you, right where you are today, can be used by God to reveal His mercy and truth. If so, let me show you something else: the way Jesus trained His unqualified disciples to do ministry. The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand appears in all four gospels, so you have probably heard the story. But did you notice that Jesus gave the disciples an impossible command and then showed them how to obey it?

Before we look at that command, let me remind you of the clear connection that Jesus made between spiritual and material needs. This is a word and deed event. In Mark’s account we learn that Jesus had compassion on the crowd, not because they forgot their lunch, but “because they were like

sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things” (6:34).

It was their need for a shepherd, *for Him*, that aroused His compassion. The miracle was a teaching tool for both the crowd and the disciples. Jesus taught the crowd that He was a shepherd worth following, because He could meet their needs. Not merely the needs of their bellies, but of their souls. By feeding so many with so little, Jesus revealed Himself as the same God who fed His people in the wilderness years before and was now with them once again. (See Exodus 16:1–36; Numbers 11:1–9.)

But He wouldn’t be with them for long. Jesus knew He would soon leave His ministry in the hands of eleven men who didn’t seem to have it all together. He had to teach the disciples how to minister to the needy and the lost. They had to know how to feed His sheep in the coming days, when He wouldn’t be with them physically.

The first thing they had to know was that they couldn’t do it alone. When Jesus told the apostles, “You give them something to eat” (Mark 6:37), He knew it was impossible for them to do it. Jesus wanted the disciples to feel the helplessness of staring thousands of hungry people in the face and not having enough food to feed them. Don’t we feel the same sense of helplessness as we look at the overwhelming needs of the world today?

Here’s my point: Feelings of helplessness should not be obstacles to ministry, but reasons to cling to Christ. Just as need drives unbelievers like Naaman into the arms of God, our helplessness keeps us coming back to Him as we do His ministry, as Spurgeon said:

It is a good thing for us to know how very poor we are, and how far from being able to meet the wants of the people around us. It is for our good to be made to confess this in so many words to our Lord. Truly, he who writes this com-

ment has often felt as if he had neither loaf nor fish, and yet for some forty years and more he has been a full-handed waiter at the King's great banquets.⁶

Jesus' next lesson was to deploy the disciples as waiters to distribute the food. He didn't lay out a buffet for the people. He could have simply snapped His fingers, made a huge table, and asked everyone to file through. Instead, He offered thanks to His Father and gave the bread and fish "to the disciples to set before the people" (Mark 6:41).

It's fascinating to me that Jesus did not explain things to the disciples first. He could have said, "All right, look. I know there's only a little bread and fish. But as you hand it out, I'm going to make it regenerate. There'll be plenty, so don't worry." Why didn't He explain the plan?

I think Jesus wanted the disciples to trust and rely on Him to do the impossible (which is just what you need to do when you move into the lives of hurting people around you). As the disciples walked around like waiters, trusting Jesus that somehow there would be food enough for all, they experienced the miracle firsthand. They saw the bread multiply in their hands, they saw the empty bellies fill up, and their faith in Jesus grew. They learned they could do impossible things when Jesus was with them.

When the disciples had counted to seven (five loaves of bread plus two fish), they felt helpless. They knew they could never feed the crowd with those seven items. But Jesus was teaching *kingdom of God algebra* to His disciples. In the regular world, $5 + 2 = 7$. But in the kingdom, where x equals Christ, $5 + 2 + x = 5,000$. Through this miracle, the disciples learned to count to eight: five loaves of bread plus two fish *plus Jesus*.

If you are trying to do something that seems impossible and you feel frustrated or hopeless, perhaps you are relying on yourself and earthly resources. Learn to count to eight. Take whatever resources you have, then ask Jesus to use them however He wants. If He has called you to do something difficult, you can be sure He will provide all that you need to do it.

Summary

Are you available to be used by Jesus? Maybe you are afraid of what you might lose—friendship, time, security, the respect of others. Yet there are people around you right now with wounds and hurts God can address through you. Some are lost souls whom God can save when they hear the gospel.

Some people, like Naaman, are good at hiding their needs behind nice clothes and comfortable lives. Pay attention at school, at work, at the pool, and in the neighborhood. You could be a messenger to hurting people there. Get close enough to folks to find out where they hurt, and be their friend. Tell them about the only Source of real healing for bodies and souls.

No one is too far outside God's household to be invited inside. And all His children are equipped to make that invitation. When God's children pour out love and compassion into the lives of hurting and broken people, we declare, "Yes! There is a God! Despite all the data to the contrary in this broken world, there really is a Rescuer in heaven, and He cares about your suffering, your sadness, and your soul." ❖

[One looking at] Christian activities which are, in a sense, directed toward this present world . . . would find that this same religion has always been healing the sick and caring for the poor . . .

C.S. Lewis

Notes

1. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.
2. Frank J. Cunningham, ed., *Words to Love By: Mother Teresa* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1983), 27.
3. Lane T. Dennis, ed., *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1985), 63.
4. See Luke 8:16; 11:33. Look also at the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37. The priest and the Levite were too busy doing their jobs and too concerned for their own safety to show compassion.
5. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 72–73.
6. C.H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: A Popular Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1893), 222.



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RECOMMENDED READING

Chris Sicks, *Tangible: Making God Known Through Deeds of Mercy and Words of Truth* (NavPress 2013)

In today's Church there seems to be two well-intentioned groups. "Deed" people feed the hungry and help the poor while "Word" people proclaim the Gospel and engage in apologetics. The two often seem to compete with one another, but God always intended them to be partners. Sacrificial love can grab the attention of those we serve, opening their ears and minds to the words we share.

In *Tangible*, author and pastor Chris Sicks explains how God's people can effectively introduce hurting people to God through intentional acts of kindness. This book does more than discuss these good ideas--it's full of ways to make God known to the needy in your community today.



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