

**July 21, 2019
Acts 14:8-18
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“Only Human”

Good morning! We are continuing with our study of the Acts of the Apostles and our Sunday School class study of “Draw the circle,” by Mark Batterson. We have been talking about the power of prayer and the mission of the earliest Christians to spread the good news of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Next week, July 28 will be the last Sunday of this series. I know that Sunday School classes and some individuals who are reading on your own may be going through “Draw the Circle” at your own pace: I encourage you to take whatever time you want to work through the book -- prayer is not a program that will be done with at the end of July; it is a practice which we were specifically focused on, and which we plan to continue until God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven -- which looks like it might be a while.

Although I have been preaching on texts in the order in which they appear in Acts, there is a lot which I have skipped over, and many chapters which we will not even get to. If you’re looking for a place to focus your Bible reading, I suggest you linger in this account of the Holy Spirit and the early church and how it related to the Church’s mission today.

This morning’s text from Acts 14 may sound a bit familiar. It shares some similarities with a healing story we read about in Chapter 3. That was soon after the day of Pentecost, and the healers were Peter and John, who met a lame beggar by the Beautiful Gate to the Temple in Jerusalem; the man went walking and leaping and praising God after that encounter. This was not necessarily a good thing for Peter and John, who were arrested and brought before the Jewish council because of that testimony. The persecution of the church begins in earnest as the Holy Spirit inspires believers to care for widows and

orphans, heal, and boldly proclaim the power of Jesus of Nazareth. After Stephen is stoned by Jewish leaders and a Pharisee named Saul begins arresting men and women and dragging them from their homes, the disciples scatter away from Jerusalem away from the city and into surrounding countries.

[Slide] We are now 12-15 years away from Pentecost; the Pharisee Saul has converted to Christianity and is now known as Paul. He is one of the leading evangelists of the church, and he and Barnabas, another leader, have been commissioned to travel on a missionary journey beginning in Antioch, traveling through Cyprus and Pamphilia (where pamphlets come from), and Barnabas and Paul are now in Lystra. There they meet a man who had been crippled from birth and had never walked -- just like the fellow at the Temple gate in Chapter 3. Being lame from birth -- as opposed to being injured or elderly -- was a big deal in the ancient world. There were very few things a man could do if he was unable to stand or walk. If you had a physical disability your economic value was pretty low, and so was your spiritual value: a man who was disabled from birth would not have been allowed into the inner sanctuary of the Temple. Unlike the man at the Beautiful Gate in Jerusalem, this fellow in Lystra wasn't even a Jew, so he would have been completely off the grid. [Slide Off]

The man listens to Paul preach (although I can imagine he didn't have a lot of choice) and afterward Paul looks at him intently, sees that he has faith to be healed and says, "Stand up on your feet!" Incredibly, the man does. We're not told any more about the reaction of the formerly lame man, but it's the crowd's reaction and especially Paul's response that I want to focus on. The crowd -- a bunch of Greek Gentiles -- begins to shout, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" The fact that they're using *gods* (plural) is the first sign of trouble, but then they call Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes, which if you know any Greek mythology is flattering, but not exactly the message which Barnabas and Paul were hoping to communicate.

In fact, Paul and Barnabas are quite distressed and say, "Why are you doing this? We're human just like you, but we're here to tell you about a living God who is larger than the earth and the sea and everything that is in them. The witness to God's goodness is what gives us life: the rains for crops which fill our bellies with food and our hearts with

joy.” I love Paul’s testimony to the power and sovereignty of God. And it got me to thinking about what God wants from us.

The Lyconians wanted to honor the gods Paul and Barnabas with garlands of flowers and a sacrifice of oxen. I don’t think that’s what God wants from us. We are working as a congregation on a practice of prayer: I don’t think God is particularly interested in flowery language. Who is that supposed to impress? There may be occasions to use a prayer which someone wrote with thee’s and thou’s : most Sundays we share a version of the Lord’s Prayer which includes words such as “hallowed,” which we wouldn’t usually use in conversation. I believe, obviously, that it is a fine thing to pray the Lord’s Prayer, but it isn’t a substitute for time set aside for heartfelt listening and speaking to God. Mark Batterson compares using only flowery prayers to sending someone you love a beautiful greeting card with a fancy poem and no personal message or signature inside. I believe God is moved by sincerity and honesty more than rhetoric. And God certainly doesn’t need our bull. I stand with the prophet Micah who said that God isn’t impressed by a great show of sacrifice, or by a big story about why we can’t or don’t do what we know we ought to. You’re probably familiar with the phrase, “I’m only human.” Paul and Barnabas tell this to the crowd at Lystra, to emphasize that the miraculous healing they performed was not through their own power, but the power of the living God. More often when we use the phrase, “I’m only human,” we use it justify something stupid we have done, and we’re trying to get let off the hook. If you’re about my age, you probably remember the 1986 song, “Human” by The Human League, in which the singer is asking for forgiveness for cheating on his girlfriend and says, “I’m only human, of flesh and blood I’m made. Human, born to make mistakes.” It’s not a bad song, but it’s a lame excuse for cheating on your girlfriend (or boyfriend) if you ask me.

There are many things we get by being human -- and one of them may be a bent toward sinning -- but that isn’t the only thing. By being human, whether we are Jews or Gentiles, believers or non-believers, citizens of this nation or some other one, physically abled or disabled, one of the things which we get by being human is the goodness of God. God the Creator, the living God. The rain to water our fields and fill our bellies with food and our hearts with joy falls on each one of us. God’s goodness is so much a part of our lives that most of us,

including me, take it for granted. For many of us, what awakens us to God's goodness is when we have come through a difficult time and have the space and the perspective to reflect and realize how much support and prayer were offered on our behalf during that time, or how we were carried by God's grace without even being aware of it. Instead of asking -- persistently -- why is this bad thing happening to me? One of the practices of regular prayer is pause to praise God for all the ways God sustains our lives, and to name the showers of blessings we might otherwise take for granted.

I have enjoyed being a part of various Sunday School classes and participating in your discussions of "Draw the Circle." If you haven't figured it out already, anything you say may turn up in a sermon at some point. Last week the Onward and Overcomers class mentioned Day 29, which is titled "A New Prayer." It was in part, about varying your prayer routine to pray in a different posture -- walking, instead of kneeling for instance -- or praying in a different manner: if you're used to speaking, pray silently -- just to keep the practice fresh. Batterson is challenging us to be mindful by considering different ways to pray and by expanding what we pray about. A member of his congregation, a biologist, accepted the challenge to thank God for daily miracles we often take for granted. He began thanking God for biological processes: Thank you God for mitochondria, thank you for glycolysis, thank you for the molecular properties of water . . . and it was a very long prayer. (p 162-3)

As part of that conversation, Marti Thompson shared a quote from her refrigerator which I'm going to paraphrase. I know some of you have heard it already, but it bears repeating: What if you woke up tomorrow with only the things you thanked God for today? We can't thank God for all the things we have or even all the things we need. But we can remember, as Paul reminded the folks in Lystra, that to be human is to be blessed. We give honor and glory to the living God that we are blessed in more ways than we can name or count.

This morning we will have the service of anointing. Anointing is for healing of mind body or spirit, for the forgiveness of sin and the strengthening of faith. It is an acknowledgement that we are human and we need to be drawn by the Spirit for the strength and grace to live each day. If you would like to be anointed, or would like receive

anointing on behalf of someone who cannot be present today, please come forward as we sing the final hymn.