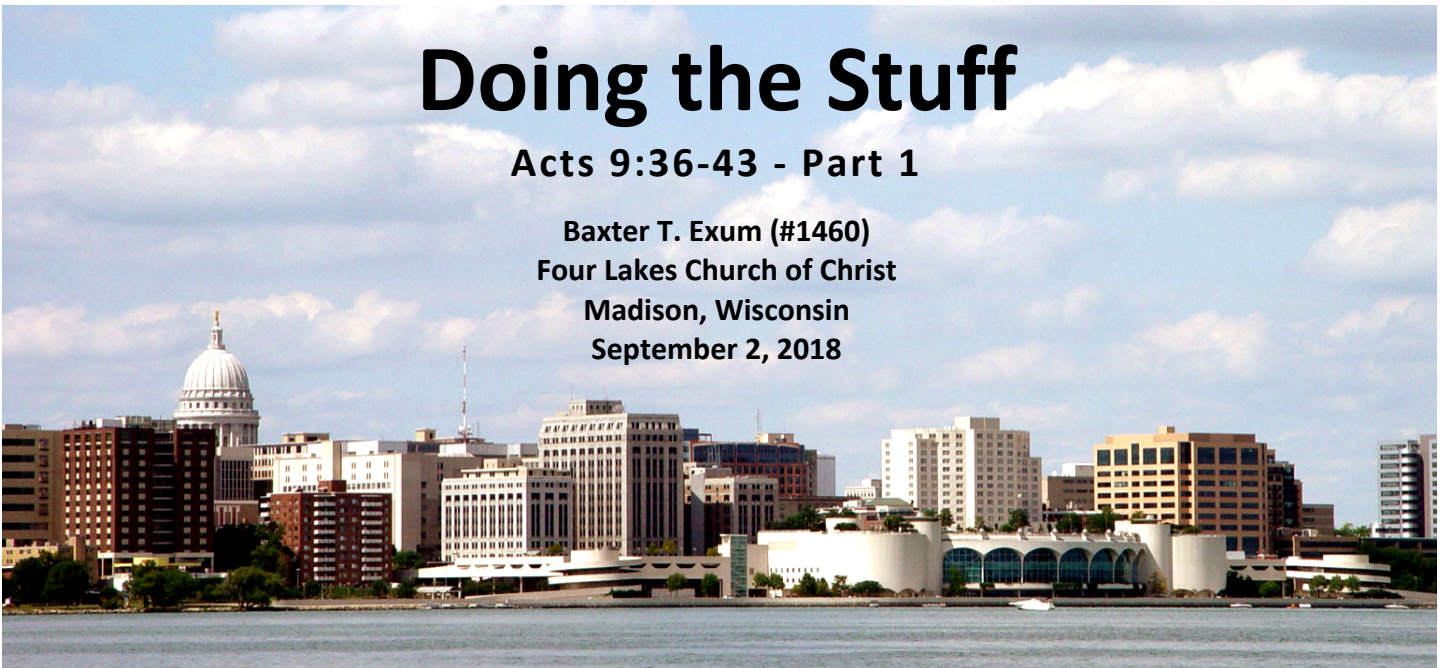


# Doing the Stuff

Acts 9:36-43 - Part 1

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As we look at the world around us and as we notice what passes as news these days, it is very easy to get somewhat disillusioned at how shallow some things seem to be. Just over the past few days, for example we've seen some people make a big deal about Ariana's dress, and Angelina's weight loss, and who attended whose funeral, and who wore what, and the latest fad of wearing your blue jeans inside out, and sometimes we ask ourselves, "So, incredibly what? Why should we even care about all of this stuff?" In a society where so much around us doesn't really matter, it is refreshing to go back to the scriptures and to study the life of a character who is known primarily for just doing good.

Several days ago, one of the young people of the congregation asked for a lesson on "doing the stuff." And what she was asking for was a lesson on actually doing what we need to do, a lesson on doing what needs to be done, a lesson on ACTION. What do we actually need to be doing in the church? Today and next Sunday, then, I want us to think about this idea of "Doing the Stuff," the idea of doing what needs doing. And for an example of a Christian who actually did what needed to be done, I want us to think for a few moments about the life of a woman whose life is described for us in Acts 9. The woman's name is Tabitha, and the account of her life, and death, and resurrection is found in Acts 9:36-43 (p. 1718).

To put this in context, the church is just a few years old at this point. In Acts 7, we have the death of Stephen that seems to have been either encouraged or coordinated by a young man by the name of Saul. The church then faces some intense persecution at the hands of Saul, and at the beginning of Acts 8, Christians basically scatter away from Jerusalem to escape this persecution. As they scatter, they teach and preach, and so in the rest of Acts 8 we have the account of Phillip preaching in Samaria, baptizing people left and right. Philip then baptizes the Ethiopian Treasurer in the last half of Acts 8. In the first part of Acts 9, Saul meets the Lord on the road to Damascus, and he is converted three days later as he is baptized for the forgiveness of his sins.

This brings us to Acts 9:32 as Peter also leaves Jerusalem and starts to preach out in the surrounding area, finding himself at a place called Lydda, as he heals a man by the name of Aeneas. I couldn't find any really good maps of Lydda that were high enough resolution to show up here without getting pixelated, so on the wall up here, I've put a screenshot of a Google map, and this first one shows the big picture - Jerusalem to the southeast, Lydda is the city in the middle (its modern name is Lod), and Joppa is in the upper left (to the northwest). This is zoomed in a bit so we can see it better, but Peter travels from Jerusalem to Lydda (roughly

a 30-mile journey). In Lydda he heals Aeneas, and as he is in Lydda, some Christians come down from Joppa with some bad news. Today, Joppa is known as Jaffa, and Jaffa is the port city of Tel Aviv, which is one of the leading cities in Israel. Joppa is the port where Solomon brought in the timber that was used to build the temple. Joppa is the port where Jonah got on a ship heading in the wrong direction. Joppa was an important city. The distance between Lydda and Joppa is about 12 miles, but the bad news Peter gets (as he is in Lydda) is that Tabitha (over in Joppa) has died.

And this brings us to Tabitha. We are introduced to Tabitha because she died, but she is important because of how she lived. Tabitha is a woman who “did the stuff.” If you will, please look with me at the account of her life in Acts 9:36-43,

***<sup>36</sup> Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated in Greek is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did. <sup>37</sup> And it happened at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body, they laid it in an upper room. <sup>38</sup> Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, “Do not delay in coming to us.” <sup>39</sup> So Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them. <sup>40</sup> But Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed, and turning to the body, he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. <sup>41</sup> And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. <sup>42</sup> It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup> And Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner named Simon.***

As we learn from this woman’s life, and as we try to answer this request from one of our young people about the importance of doing what needs to be done, I’d like to make several observations.

- I. **And the first thing I want us to notice about Tabitha’s life is that she is described in this passage as being a DISCIPLE.**

Even before we know her name, we know that this woman is a “disciple.” Literally, she is a “learner,” a “student,” an “apprentice.” And this is the only time that the feminine form of this word is used in the New Testament! And what an honor this is! She is described here as a “disciple,” she is a “student” of Jesus. Some have suggested the possibility, then, that Tabitha might have literally studied under the Lord, that she knew Jesus personally, that she was one of those women who followed Jesus around and listened to his teaching. After all, what we are studying here takes place less than ten years after the Lord’s death - this takes place in roughly 38 or 39 AD, and Jesus was crucified in 30 AD. Tabitha, then, is the embodiment of what Jesus commanded in the “Great Commission” (in Matthew 28:19-20), when he told the apostles to, “Go...and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you....” Tabitha is a “disciple,” she is a follower of Jesus, she is a student of Jesus.

Beyond this, only after we learn that she is a disciple, do we now find that this woman’s name is “Tabitha.” And Luke (the author of this account) also tells us that her name translated into Greek is “Dorcas.” So, “Tabitha” is Aramaic (the language that Jesus and most of the Jews spoke at that time) - it is a Hebrew dialect. If you saw *The Passion of the Christ* a number of years ago, you might remember that the movie was filmed in Aramaic. We only had English in the subtitles. “Tabitha,” then, is Aramaic, and the Greek version of her name

is ***"Dorcas."*** And as your footnotes might explain, both words translate into English as ***"gazelle."*** Dorcas, by the way, goes back to a Greek word referring to the idea of "seeing clearly," and the word eventually came to refer to this animal with large, bright eyes. And looking at a gazelle, I think I can "SEE" why! But that explains the gazelle on the wall up here! They do seem to have rather large eyes! I am reminded of those Disney princesses whose eyes are exactly the same width as their waist. I read that somewhere years ago, and now that's all I think of when I see a Disney character - you take the width of one eye, and the eye is often the same width as the waist. It is rather out of proportion - there's no wonder why our teens have some issues with body image. But that is the history of the word ***"Dorcas."*** It goes back to the Greek word for "seeing clearly" and came to describe this animal with abnormally large and out of proportion eyes. Gazelles, of course, are somewhat smaller than but similar to the deer that we have around here in Wisconsin, and their behavior is somewhat similar as well - they eat, and then they run around trying not to get eaten!

Have you ever wondered why Luke gives us both the Greek and the Aramaic names for this woman? We aren't told, but it is interesting that this passage comes right before the conversion of Cornelius, the first Gentile to obey the gospel. Some have suggested, then, that Luke gives both the Greek and Aramaic versions of this woman's name because Tabitha was already actively working with both sets of people. Again, I don't know how much of a deal to make of this, but if that is the case, that would be amazing. Even before Peter basically has his arm twisted by the Lord to go preach to a Gentile, it's possible that Tabitha was already working with widows from both groups, both Jews and Gentiles. And so, as she provided clothing, some of the women (the Jews) would call her Tabitha, and some of the women (the Gentiles) would call her Dorcas. Even before what happens with Cornelius in Acts 10, Tabitha is perhaps already bridging the gap between Jews and Gentiles.

We won't make too big a deal of this either, but I would also just briefly point out that there is no "Mr. Dorcas" in this passage. Some have suggested, then, that Tabitha is single here - either never married, divorced, or perhaps widowed (and I would put more weight on this third option). And I say this for two reasons: 1.) First of all, as a seaport town, Joppa would have most likely had a slightly higher proportion of widows, as sailing and commercial fishing were quite dangerous. Many men were killed on the sea, and those women would have been left behind, many of them in Joppa. 2.) But then secondly, Tabitha finds herself serving widows, and it is possible that she sees the need for this because she herself is a widow. Again, these are just possibilities, but it is interesting that Tabitha seems to be on her own here. And I would take this as something of an encouragement to the women who study this passage: You do not need a man in your life to do some amazing things!

The main point here at the beginning, though, is that Tabitha is a ***"disciple."*** Just a few years earlier, Jesus used the same word and said (in Luke 6:40), ***"A pupil [disciple] is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher."*** Tabitha, then, was apparently so much like her teacher that she is described as his ***"disciple."*** And as a student, what did Tabitha learn? Was she listening when her Teacher said that the greatest of all the commandments is to love God, and that the second is that we are to love our neighbors? Apparently, she was listening. She was a disciple. And what an amazing honor it is to be described like this! And how awesome it would be for US to be described like this! Hopefully, the people who know us would also be able to recognize that we are disciples of Jesus, that we are his students, that we are his followers, that we take his word seriously. So, Tabitha is a ***"disciple."***

- II. This leads us to something else we learn from this woman's life, and that is: Tabitha, "**WAS ABOUNDING WITH DEEDS OF KINDNESS AND CHARITY WHICH SHE CONTINUALLY DID.**" Or to put it another way: Tabitha was known for **DOING STUFF!**

She "***was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did.***" This wasn't a matter of helping here and there every once in a while, but this was a matter of doing good "***continually.***" This was her life. Her life overflowed with "***deeds of kindness and charity.***" "***Charity***" is the idea of "***mercy.***" Literally, her life overflowed with "***deeds of mercy.***" She did for others what they were unable to do for themselves. And as we find later in this passage, she specialized in making clothing for widows. This wasn't just an idea she had. This isn't something she approached the elders about to see whether they could start some program. This is just something she did. She saw a need, and then she started doing stuff to meet the need. This was her life. She was a disciple of Jesus who saw these women in need of clothing, and then she did something about it. How do you see that someone is in need of clothing? You look at somebody, and the clothing they have is threadbare. You look at somebody, and the clothing they are wearing is ripped. You look at somebody, and the clothing they have doesn't fit. It's rather awkward to go from noticing this to doing something about it. Tabitha, though, saw this need and fixed it! Tabitha lived Scripture several years before James would go on to say that, "***Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.***" In fact, I would not be surprised at all to learn that James was thinking of Tabitha when he wrote those words. She didn't wait to be asked to do this, but she saw a need and started working on it. Nearly thirty years would go by before Paul would write to the women in Ephesus (in 1 Timothy 2:9-10), "***I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.***" Sometimes the emphasis in this passage is on how high, how low or how tight a garment might be - most of us have seen this passage used in that context; however, Paul's concern was not under-dressing; instead, his primary concern was that some women were over-dressing, that they were spending too much time, effort, and money to be noticed, and his command was that women were to be clothed - not with fancy clothing, but instead, with good deeds. And that is exactly what Tabitha had done. She was "***clothed with good deeds.***"

By the way, we know what Tabitha DID, but we know nothing of what she SAID, do we? We have no record of Tabitha saying anything in this passage. She never preached to thousands (like Peter), she never stood before kings and governors (like Paul), she never traveled to far off lands to preach the gospel (like Silas and Barnabas). But as we know, actions speak much louder than words. Tabitha lived out the worthy woman in Proverbs 31, "***She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hands grasp the spindle. She extends her hand to the poor, and she stretches out her hands to the needy***" (19-20). Tabitha was a disciple of Jesus who saw people in need and then set out to do what needed to be done.

Why sewing instead of something else? Why not a food pantry? Why not a soup kitchen? Why not a medical clinic? My guess is that Tabitha already knew how to sew, and she saw that her skill could help in some way. As somebody has pointed out, if she had been a gardener, she would have grown food. If she had been a potter, she would have made pots for these widows. But as it was, she could make clothing, and so she took that skill and she used it. Doing stuff might be anything. In Matthew 25, Jesus spoke of those fed the hungry, gave a drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and those in prison. He said, in fact, "***...to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me***" (Matthew 25:40). So, helping others (and helping Jesus in the process) might involve just about anything.

So, if we're wondering what we might be able to do, if our teens are wondering what they might be able to do, I would suggest making a list: What are you good at? Do you cook? Do you fix cars or computers? Do you drive? Do you mow lawns? Do you create music? Do you create videos? Do you love writing? Do you love lifting weights? Are you good at taking pictures? Whatever you do, look for a need that can be met by your skill or your talent - even something that you enjoy doing, and try to find some way to do good. Do the stuff!

Do we know any Tabithas? Do we know any people like this? Do we know disciples of Jesus who see a need and just start doing whatever is necessary? Do we know people who smell a dead chipmunk and immediately start taking stuff apart to find it? I know some people like that. Do we know people who make calls and drop off food for the sick? I know some people like that. Do we know people who hear about hungry school kids and go out and buy snacks and school supplies? I know people like that. Do we know people who set aside time to make handmade hats and bibs for cancer patients and for the elderly in nursing homes? I know people like that! And so for those who might be looking for some way to do stuff, opportunities are available. And I would go further by suggesting that we make our own opportunities.

As we come near the end of this first part of our study of this passage, I would give a few examples, starting with a man who served as an elder at the church where I was born down in Freeport, Illinois. I have no memory of this man and his wife, but my parents have reminded me through the years of Kenneth and Mae Lee. Brother Lee worked basically as a janitor at an apartment building, and as pay for doing that work, he and his wife were allowed to live in the basement apartment for free. My parents have said that the Lees were some of the first people to invite them into their home when they first moved to Freeport back in 1966. Imagine a young couple moving from Tennessee up to northern Illinois, and imagine the encouragement that must have been. I've been told that the Lees always drove an old car and didn't have very much, but they did what they could to encourage other people. They were disciples of Jesus Christ. They saw a need, they saw what they could do about it, and they did it. Tabitha was like that. So I would ask: Do you have an apartment? Do you have a place to live? Can you somehow afford one of those \$3 pizzas from Kwik Trip? Then I would suggest that you have the power to encourage a young couple here at this congregation. I mention the Lee's names simply to honor them just as Tabitha was honored here. They have long since gone on to their reward, but their example lives on.

The second example goes back to a man I met at Polishing the Pulpit a few weeks ago, a man by the name of Ken Gardner. This is apparently Ken Day here at the Four Lakes congregation (Kenneth Lee and now Ken Gardner). On the schedule, I saw a lesson called, "Nuts and Bolts: Prison Ministry is a Ripe Field. Here's what's working for us." We have something of a prison ministry here, so I went to see what I could learn. It turns out that Ken is rather old. I'm guessing he might be in his mid 80's. He actually reminded me a bit of Jerry Turley! Ken got up to speak, and explained that when he retired from some kind of secular work, he got into mission work. And for a number of years, he traveled to some far off places to teach and preach the gospel - medical campaigns in third world countries, and so on. But after some heart surgery, his doctor said, "No more of these trips. You need to stay within 2-3 hours of a hospital. A real hospital." Ken was somewhat discouraged, but he felt that he still had more to offer, so he opened his eyes, and he realized that there were hundreds of people right there in his local jail. He started sending Bible correspondence courses. Those courses started coming back, and soon, one of those inmates was asking to be baptized. He talked to the jail commander about releasing the inmate for a bit so they could go to church to baptize the guy. After the commander and his people stopped laughing, they suggested just doing the baptism in the jail. Ken had to explain that baptism is an immersion, but it wasn't long until he found a portable baptistery. I don't remember all of the details, but as the ministry grew, it expanded to a nearby state prison, they now have multiple teams of people going into these local jails and state prisons down in Mississippi, and if I remember this correctly, Ken has now baptized

around 460 people! That started with an old man having heart surgery, but instead of quitting, instead of sitting around watching TV, he opened his eyes, he saw a need, and he did what was needed. He is still doing what is needed. He explained that he will spend the rest of his time on this earth serving those men and women behind bars.

### **Conclusion:**

As we wrap up our thoughts on this first part of our study of Tabitha, I would point out that over and over again, the Bible emphasizes the importance of action, the importance of actually doing things. We think of what James said in James 2:14-17, ***“What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”***

We also think of what John wrote in 1 John 2:16-18, ***“We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”*** For Tabitha, her faith meant that she had to actually do something. Like Jesus, she loved the widows of Joppa - not with words only, but she loved them in deed and in truth. She saw a need and she worked to meet that need.

One thing I really love about this account is that the book of Acts is a history of the early church on a large scale - we have the ministry of basically two of the apostles - Peter in the first half and Paul in the second half. We have the growth of the church from Jerusalem all the way to Rome. And yet even with the large scale of what’s going on here, Luke zooms in on one woman in one village - and he shows us not just the growth of the Lord’s church as a whole, but he shows us what Christian living is all about - individually. He shows us what we can do. And that is where we pause for now. I hope you will join us again next week as we continue answering this request from one of our teens and as we go on to look at two more lessons from the life of this woman.

The good news is that any of us in this room can be a disciple of Jesus just as she was. Again, as Jesus spoke to his apostles right before his ascension back into heaven, he said, ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”*** (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus wants us to make people his students, his followers, and we become his followers when we are baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We are his disciples when we observe all that he has commanded us to do. That offer is still open. If you are ready to make that commitment, if you are ready to live the rest of your life serving others in the name of Jesus, if you are ready to commit to being a disciple, we would love to help in any way that we can. If you’d like to talk about it, get in touch at any time, but if you are ready right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [foullakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:foullakeschurch@gmail.com)