

Tabitha

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to the second passage that we read in the book of Acts, in Acts chapter 9. As already been mentioned this morning, after the sermon, we will be participating in the sacrament of baptism. And I use that verb deliberately, we will be participating. We're not simply witnesses of what others will be doing, but as God's people gathered, we participate in the sacrament by our very presence and by the way in which we so identify with the one being baptized this morning. And today, we will be baptizing Tabitha Rose. And as I was thinking of a message for this morning, I was drawn to the name Tabitha. And ordinarily, we say ordinarily, on some occasions we may have two or three infants being baptized, and this would be very difficult to do because you couldn't really choose one if there were others. But on this occasion, there is just one baby being baptized, and so I thought, well, I could think about the name, and particularly as the name is found in the Bible. It is, of course, a biblical name. We've read in the passage there in Acts where we meet Tabitha. They're a member of the church in Joppa. We want to think about Tabitha. We want to learn about her, but we also, perhaps more importantly, want to learn from her. Now, as I'm sure you are aware, this point will be made on many occasions by many preachers in the Bible. Names are very significant. On some occasions, much more significant than others, but almost invariably significant. And so, as I thought about this name, I wondered if there is a particular significance in the name. And in my investigation, I came across an explanation that was given for the name by the reformer, John Calvin. And what he said struck me, and I have to say also amused me. And when I read out what he says about the name, you will maybe understand why I found it a little amusing. And I quote directly from his commentary on the book of Acts, where he gives his opinion on the name. And he says this, for Dorcas, it's the Greek version of the name Tabitha, which is Aramaic, for Dorcas or

Tabitha signifieth a goat. I'm sure Gavin and Phoebe didn't think of that when they gave the name. But then what does Calvin say? But the holiness of her life did easily wipe away the blot of a name not very seemingly. Well, that's not a very encouraging start, really, is it?

Fortunately, on this occasion, Calvin is wrong. That's a very bold thing to say that. But I think the consensus is that on this occasion, he is wrong. Tabitha doesn't mean goat, means gazelle.

Maybe in the footnote of your Bibles, you'll have noticed that already. A much more graceful creature, with all due respect to the goats of the world. But gazelle, I think, is the consensus concerning the meanings of the name. Now, as we turn to think about Tabitha, and really moving away from the name and the meaning it might have to the person, and we can think about what we're told about Tabitha, the information that we're given by Luke, we can consider it under four headings.

First of all, we can think of Tabitha as one called by Jesus. Then we'll move on to maybe what is more prominent in the passage or in the information we have, that Tabitha is one who served like Jesus.

[4 : 04] But then also, and again, very prominent in the account, Tabitha is one raised by Jesus. And then finally, something that we also can identify in the passage, that Tabitha was one who points to Jesus. She did so then, and she continues to do so. So, called by Jesus, served like Jesus, raised by Jesus, and also one who points to Jesus. Let's begin then, as we consider Tabitha as one called by Jesus. In verse 36, we read, in Joppa, there was a disciple named Tabitha.

And I'm really focusing in on that word, disciple. Tabitha is spoken of as a disciple. And we could read that, and it's such a common word, such a familiar word in the New Testament, we might think little of it that she would be so described as a disciple. But it is actually a very significant use of the word on this occasion. And the reason why it is particularly significant is that it is the only occasion in the New Testament where the word disciple is used to speak of a woman.

Now, it's very clear on some of the occasions when the word is used that it is implicit that the word is appropriate for men and women, followers of Jesus. But this is the only occasion where it's used very explicitly to describe a woman. To give just an example of where it's used in the plural form and very clearly to include women, we only need to look at this same chapter, chapter 9.

And notice what is said there. So in the same chapter, at the beginning of the chapter, notice what we read. Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. It's the same word, but in the plural. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus so that if he found any there who belonged to the way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. And it's clear that those being referred to at the beginning as disciples are then identified as being men or women. Not in debate, really, whether disciples include men or women. But it is at least curious that this is the only occasion in our passage, the latter part of the chapter, where the word is used of a woman, in this case, Tabitha. Now, we take it as a given that men and women can be and ought to be equally described as disciples. But in first century Palestine, this was a radical notion. But Tabitha here is spoken of by Luke as a disciple named Tabitha. But leaving aside the curiosity that it's the only occasion where a woman is so described, what does the word, the word disciple, tell us about Tabitha? Well, I think it tells us two things, two related truths concerning Tabitha. First of all, it tells us that she was called by Jesus, called by Jesus. In Mark's gospel, we've been looking at the early chapters of Mark's gospel these past two or three months, and we've been seeing how discipleship begins with the call of

Jesus to follow Him. He directs the call, follow Me. And those who would be His disciples respond to that call. They hear the call, and they respond to the call. And to be a disciple is to be one who has been called and who has responded to the call of Jesus. Now, if Tabitha is spoken of as a disciple, then we can conclude that that is true of her. Tabitha heard the call of Jesus. Tabitha responded to the call of Jesus. Now, given when this is taking place, given the location of where she lives, we can confidently say that she didn't hear Jesus Himself utter those words that the disciples heard there in the early chapters of Mark, when Jesus directly addresses those words to His first disciples. But nonetheless, it is Jesus who, through His disciples, continues to call and called Tabitha.

[8 : 39] And so, she heard that call, and she responded to that call. So, she was called by Jesus. But the word also, the very meaning of the word disciple has within it another implicit truth, and that is that she was taught by Jesus. The word disciple means learner. That is what a disciple is, a learner, and one who learns from the one who calls. Jesus calls, and Jesus instructs His disciples, His learners. Of course, that was true of Tabitha. As a disciple, she not only responded to the call, but then she learned from Jesus. And if I could give Calvin a chance to vindicate himself following his rather unfortunate suggestion that Tabitha means goat. Listen to what Calvin has to say about Tabitha as a learner.

And he says this, This is the chiefest praise. This is the beginning of holy life. This is the root of all virtue. Jesus to have learned of the Son of God to live. He says this about Tabitha, to have learned of the Son of God to live. And that is true of Tabitha. She learned from Jesus to live, what life really is all about, what life in abundance is all about, what the meaning of life is, what it is that we have been called to do and to live. She learned that from Jesus. She was a disciple of Jesus. And as we apply this truth of Tabitha as a learner, a disciple, as we apply it to what occupies our attention this morning, and we apply that truth from Tabitha in the Bible to Tabitha Rose, we can see the great responsibility that is laid upon us as a congregation, and also very particularly upon Gavin and Phoebe as Christian parents, indeed and all Christian parents, to instruct our children that they might learn to live as disciples of Jesus. And this is our hope. And I say our because I'm speaking of all of us who make up this congregation. This is our hope and prayer for Tabitha Rose, that she would hear the Lord's call to be His disciple, that she would gladly and decidedly respond to that call and learn from Him. So Tabitha was called by Jesus. But then we also introduce what we had to say by noticing that she was also one who served like Jesus. Tabitha was called by Jesus to a life of service. In the words of Paul as he addresses or as he writes to the Ephesians, we can say of Tabitha that she was God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.

That is why she was created. That is why she was called to do good works. And it's very striking the manner in which that is spoken of by Luke. There in verse 36, in Joppa, there was a disciple named Tabitha, which translated as Dorcas, who was always doing good, who was always doing good and helping the poor. Tabitha responded to that call to service with striking resolve and devotion.

Always doing good. What literally is said there is that she was full of good works and acts of mercy, full of good works, always doing good. And when we read that language, that description of Tabitha, I wonder, does that remind you of somebody we know? Well, perhaps it reminds you of a number of people you know. But it certainly reminds us of somebody we meet in the Gospels. If we just turn to the following chapter in Acts, in the book of Acts, chapter 10 and verses 37 and 38. Listen to what is said.

By Peter, he's in the home of Cornelius, and he's explaining about Jesus. And what does he say there in verse 36 of chapter 10? You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee, after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and then especially what Peter says, and how Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him.

[13 : 31] Tabitha served like Jesus. The description we're given of Tabitha, so similar in that respect to what Peter says of Jesus. She was always doing good, and of Jesus we're told he went around doing good, always doing good. Also, Tabitha served like Jesus. And that's what we would expect of one called and taught by Jesus. But I want us to just maybe dwell a little more on some of the characteristics of this service of Tabitha, so similar to, so reflective of her Savior. I want to notice three aspects of her service, this way in which Tabitha served like Jesus. First thing I want you to notice is her motivation to serve in this way. And I want to suggest that her motivation at heart, the foundation of it, it was the love and mercy of Christ. The words that are used by Luke to describe what Tabitha did, she was always doing good and helping the poor, especially those words or that phrase, helping the poor, translates one Greek word which could be literally rendered as acts of mercy.

This is what all religious Jews, indeed all Jews, were expected to perform acts of mercy on behalf of those in need. And within the word, it's just one word, but within this word, it's a composite word, you have that word mercy. And though perhaps many perform these acts of charity for other reasons, to fulfill what was expected of them, the very word was a constant reminder that at the heart of what was being done, there needed to be this motivation of mercy and compassion and love.

We can be sure that in the case of Tabitha, that is indeed, or that was indeed what was at the very heart of her motivation. She served those in need, driven by the love and mercy of Christ that she had experienced and that she now could show to others. She was motivated to serve the poor and the needy and the hurting out of love. And as we look forward to seeing Tabitha Rose grow into childhood, into adolescence, into a young woman that may seem a long way away, yet our prayer is that she too might serve those who are in need, driven by Christ-like love and compassion. Indeed, may that be true of all of us.

This is one feature of her service like Jesus, the motivation behind it, but we can also notice that the focus of it. And here I want to suggest that the focus of her service were those who were directed to her by Jesus. Now, we were sure that those she served were not only the widows, but they are the ones that are particularly mentioned. As one who was always doing good and helping the poor, I'm sure that extended beyond the widows. But in the passage, widows are particularly highlighted. We notice there in verse 39, following her death, we read all the widows stood around him, that is around Peter, crying and showing the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them, evidently made for them. Indeed, in all probability, they were wearing the clothing. They didn't bring it along and say, look at this. No, they were saying, look at the clothes I'm wearing. Dorcas made that for me.

And so, very particularly, she directed her service to those who were widows. And I think we can reasonably assume by extension many orphans also. That was the focus. Why? Why the widows? Why did she particularly concentrate her love and her mercy and her service on the widows? Well, I think we can say by command and by circumstance. I say by command because as one who would have become familiar with the Bible and with the challenges that God lays upon His people throughout the Bible, there is this constant instruction and expectation that God's people would serve the widows and the orphans and those in need and those oppressed. And Tabitha, conscious of that, as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, would have sought to do what she was commanded to do. So, command comes into it, but not just command also circumstance. In her particular situation, there was this particular need that she was familiar with, that she was aware of, and that she responded to. I don't know if this is maybe somewhat speculative. Well, it is speculative, but I don't know if it's legitimately speculative.

[18:37] We're told that she lived in Joppa. Now, Joppa was a fishing town. And I wonder, and we can't do more than wonder, but I wonder, given that that's so, whether there was a greater preponderance of widows.

We know how dangerous it is to go out to sea to fish. And you wonder how many women in the community had suffered the tragedy of a loss of a husband in those circumstances. Well, we don't know.

But what we do know is that there were widows in need of help, and Tabitha was ready to help them, directed to her by command, but also by circumstance.

We also notice how in the Bible we've spoken about God commanding us as His people to serve those in need, widows and orphans. But it's interesting how in the psalm that we read, Psalm 146, and we'll sing it at the close of our service, not only is there the command, but God Himself is spoken of as the one who cares for and reaches out and attends to the widows.

Not just that He delegates it to others, you know, something you've got to do. No, that is what God does. It's in the heart of God. And it's because it's in the heart of God that He then would have us also do likewise. So, this service of Tabitha like Jesus in its motivation, also in its focus.

[20 : 10] And notice also when we're thinking of this service to the widows, notice that her loving service extends to all in Joppa, Jews and Gentiles, believers and unbelievers. Now, I have to recognize that the passage itself doesn't state that explicitly, but there are one or two hints that I think we can draw that conclusion from. Let me just identify one of those hints that we have in the passage.

In verse 41, when Dorcas has been raised back to life by Peter, we read there that he took her by the hand, helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them a lie. That's a curious way of putting it. He called the believers and the widows.

They seem to be distinguishing these two groups. Now, of course, that's not to say that among the widows there weren't believers. I'm sure there were. But the fact that he distinguishes the two groups, that's partly because the widows had been so much help by Dorcas. But I wonder if there's not a recognition that among the widows there would have been those who weren't believers.

But they were, of course, very grateful to Tabitha for her love and service. And so, they're there also. And I wonder whether we can draw from that that conclusion that in her service to the widows, she wasn't saying, oh, well, you've got to be a Christian to get my help.

No, if you're a widow, if you're in need, if you're suffering, then I want to help you. And also, and this is maybe stretching things somewhat more in terms of helping Jews and Gentiles, it is curious that we're given her name in both Aramaic and Greek, Tabitha and Dorcas.

[21 : 50] That's not uncommon. It happens on other occasions in the Bible where we're given the two names and the two languages. But I wonder whether the reason for it is to highlight the fact that in the community where she lived, she was known by Jews and Gentiles, perhaps known by these two names. The Jews would have spoken to her as Tabitha, and perhaps the Greeks would have spoken to her as Dorcas, and no doubt among the widows also. Well, again, we don't know if that is the case, but it perhaps suggests that that was so. But perhaps more importantly in this matter of her service to the widows is the fact that it was a service that develops very clearly into heartfelt affection and friendship for these women. And we see that that heartfelt connection between the widows and Dorcas, we see that in the grief that surrounds her death. In verse 39, Peter went with them, those who had called him, and when he arrived, he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows, stood around him crying and showing in the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made.

And there's no reason to doubt that this was heartfelt grief on the part of these widows. Why? Because Tabitha wasn't simply somebody who wrote checks. She wasn't just a wealthy woman and said, oh, I better fulfill my duty for the poor, so I'll write a check and give it to the charity, but hands off. No, she was hands on in helping these women. They knew her, they loved her. She knew them, she loved them. And so when she dies, the grief is indescribable. Tabitha, the one who loved us so much, she's gone, she's dying. And they're distraught at the loss of one they loved and one who loved them so deeply. Her motivation, her focus, particularly on the widows of the community, but then also her ministry. What is it that she actually did for them? Well, no doubt she did many things, but there is one ministry in particular that is spoken of, and I'm calling it a ministry that was given to her by Jesus.

Her motivation is the love of Jesus. Her focus is those who were directed to her by Jesus, but her ministry is the ministry given to her by Jesus. And her ministry, the one that is specifically mentioned was to sew. We've read the verse already a couple of times, these widows showing Peter the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

She sewed for Jesus. I don't know if that sounds corny to you, but it's true. She sewed for Jesus, a task that maybe some thought of no great significance. Well, she just sews. She makes clothes, she makes dresses. It's not that important in the grand scheme of things, but clearly it was. It was important to the women who were helped. It was important to the orphans who were helped. It was important, evidently, to the community that she was part of. They valued this service on the part of Tabitha. And most importantly of all, it was important to God. God gave her this ministry, and God valued this ministry that she exercised of making these robes and clothing for those in need.

And of course, as that was valuable, so every act of ordinary service, or indeed those acts that might be deemed or described as ordinary, are of great volume. Sewing for Jesus, cooking for Jesus, cleaning for Jesus, driving for Jesus, and no doubt we could multiply the examples.

[25 : 33] Valued by those who are helped, valued by, we trust, ought to be valued by the community of faith, where these acts of service are being taken or are happening, and valued by God.

Whatever your ministry or act of service is, do you know what it is? If you don't know what it is, that's a problem. Whatever your act of service is, it has been given to you by Jesus and is important to Jesus. And our hope and prayer for Tabitha Rose, and indeed for all our children as they grow up in the congregation and in the faith, is that they might learn to serve like Jesus, as Tabitha did.

But let's move on and notice another feature, a characteristic of Tabitha that we find in the passage, and that is that she was raised by Jesus. The heart of the story is Tabitha being raised from the dead. I think we can speak of a threefold raising, very briefly. And let me explain what I mean by a threefold raising. First of all, we can say of Tabitha that she was raised to new life when first called. We don't need to dwell on this. We've already spoken of her as being called.

But when she was called by Jesus, when she came to faith in Jesus Christ, she was raised to new life by Jesus. Tabitha was a sinner just like you and me, each and every one of us. She was by nature dead in her transgressions and sins. But God, who is rich in mercy, made her alive in Christ, raised by God in Christ. That we might describe as the first resurrection of Tabitha. But then also raised or resurrected to continued service. And we're thinking of what happened here in the passage.

We're told that Tabitha died. It would appear in sudden and tragic circumstances. And such was the esteem in which she was held that the believers can't contemplate life in their community without her. And so they call Peter. They've already heard of the amazing things that have been done by the hand of Peter. And they perhaps wonder, might Peter be able to help? We're not sure what their expectations were when they called Peter. But of course, what happens is that Peter comes and he performs this great miracle of resurrection. But is it really Peter who raises Tabitha from the dead? Notice that when Peter arrives, what is the first thing that he does? Well, he goes into the room. He gets everybody to leave the room. But then notice what he does. In verse 40, we're told, Peter sent them all out of the room. Then he got down on his knees and prayed. Having prayed, he then addresses the words that he addresses to Tabitha. And in praying and in Peter making sure that that detail is known, he was alone in the room with Tabitha. The only person who could have given that detail to whoever wrote this, be it

[28 : 34] Luke directly or through others, was Peter. It's only Peter and Tabitha. Tabitha's dead at this point. She didn't see him praying. So the only way we could know this is because Peter made sure that that was known. You hear the point I'm making? It's the only way we could know is if Peter had explained that.

And why was he so careful to ensure that people knew that he prayed? Well, surely it was because he wanted to make sure that people knew that it wasn't his power that was raising this woman from the dead.

It was God's power. And so he prayed to God that God would do this great miracle through him. It's also interesting to see the language that Peter uses in the previous miracle that he's involved in in this same passage. We didn't read the verse, but in verse 34, we have lame being healed. And notice the language Peter uses there. Peter said to him, Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and tidy up your mat. If you'd only said, get up and tidy up your mat, you'd say, well, that sounds so like what Jesus said.

Peter's careful. He says, Jesus Christ heals you. And then he goes on and says, get up and take your mat. Who is it that is raising this woman from the dead? It is Jesus through the agency of Peter raised to continued service. But then I think we can also say of Tabitha, there's nothing in the passage that speaks of this. But we know it's true because of what we know is true for every believer is that Tabitha will also experience, this is something in the future, a third resurrection. For she with all believers will be raised to eternal life. No explicit mention in the passage, but this miracle, this miracle of resurrection serves as a reminder of God's power and victory over death. And that power and victory over death will be ultimately and finally demonstrated on the last day when Tabitha and all believers will be raised to eternal life and granted glorified bodies to die no more.

And it is our prayer that Tabitha Rose might know and live the eternal life that God grants to His children. But then finally and more briefly, we can say of Tabitha that she points to Jesus.

[30 : 48] Tabitha pointed to Jesus in her life, in her death, and in the resurrection that we read of in the passage. She pointed to Jesus in her life of service. I've already made the point that there would have been among the widows, I'm sure, those who were not believers. But I can also state with confidence that there would have been many widows who would have been certainly given the opportunity to hear about Jesus through the love and service of Tabitha. And of those, I am sure there were those who embraced the faith, who came to put their trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior because of Tabitha, because of her service. She pointed to Jesus. Maybe they would have asked her, why are you doing this? Why do you love us so much? Why do you spend so much time and effort serving us? And Tabitha would have said, it's because of Jesus. Because of the love that I have experienced and experienced in Him. That's why I do this. She wouldn't have announced it from the rooftops, but when asked, she would have explained why she did what she did and in that way pointed to

Jesus. But also in her death and resurrection. Notice what the passage explicitly says happens following this great miracle that took place. In verse 42 we read, this became known all over Joppa.

Of course, it would become known. It's not the kind of thing you can keep quiet. This became known all over Joppa. But then what does it say? And many people believed in the Lord. There's Tabitha.

Not through any activity on her part, but by just being who she was, pointing people to Jesus. And as a result, many people believed in the Lord. Tabitha was called by Jesus. She served like Jesus.

She was raised by Jesus. And she points us to Jesus. And really all of these truths can be encapsulated in one reality concerning Tabitha, and that is that she was loved by Jesus. All of these come under that great umbrella reality. Loved by Jesus, and thus called, and thus called to service, thus raised to life, and thus able to point others to Jesus and to His love.

[33 : 12] There is a, and with this I close, there's a curious connection that we can make with this name Tabitha. I don't think there's anything in it other than a coincidence, but nonetheless it's a curious coincidence.

The name, as we mentioned at the beginning, means gazelle, the Aramaic and the Greek word for gazelle. And with that in mind, when we turn to the Song of Songs, we're familiar with the Song of Songs, this song that celebrates in verse the love of the Lord for His bride, though there are many ways in which the book is understood, but certainly that's one way, I think, a reasonable way of understanding it. In the Song of Songs, in the second chapter, the lover is described as a gazelle. You can look up and read the chapter if you wish in your own time.

In chapter 2, verses 8 and 9, and the pictures of the lover like a gazelle leaping over the mountains in lovesick pursuit of his beloved. It's a picture being painted so in love that like a gazelle leaps to the encounter of his beloved. Well, Tabitha, the gazelle, discovered in her own life the love of the Lord who pursued her, gazelle-like, that he might love her deeply and eternally.

And it is that same pursuing love that pursues you, that same love that would seek you out to know it and experience it and like Tabitha reflected to others. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word. We thank you that you are a God who calls us, who calls us to serve. We thank you that you are a God who calls us that we might know and experience a life everlasting, life in all its fullness. We thank you that you are a God who calls us, that we in our own lives, as we know and experience and enjoy your love for us, so we might in some small measure reflect it and in that way point others to Jesus. We thank you for what we can learn from this woman of whom we read and the little that we're told. Tabitha here in the Bible, a disciple called Tabitha from Joppa. Lord, we pray that what was true of her would be true of us, that it would be true of our children as they grow up in the faith, that they would be disciples of Jesus, called by Him, serving like Him, raised to life by Him, and ever pointing to Him. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.