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Bridgeway Church
John 13-17 / #7
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Sermon Summary #7

Doing the (Miraculous) Works of Jesus John 14:12

Is it ok to pray for a miracle? To hope for a miracle? To seek God for a miracle? For many years I thought it was unspiritual to desire or seek for *any* spiritual gifts, especially those of a more overt miraculous nature. I had been taught it was an indication of immaturity to seek signs in any sense, that it was a weak faith, born of theological ignorance, that it was only the biblically illiterate and emotionally unstable people who prayed for healing or a demonstration of divine power. One author I read actually said that to desire miracles is sinful and unbelieving! But then I noticed Acts 4:29-31, which records this prayer of the church in Jerusalem:

“And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Thy bondservants may speak Thy word with all confidence, while Thou dost extend Thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders takes place through the name of Thy holy servant Jesus. And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:29-31).

I trust that no one would accuse these believers of emotionalism or mental imbalance! Evidently they didn't believe there was any inconsistency between miracles and the message of the gospel, between the wonders for which they prayed and the word of the cross they so fervently preached.

People have often responded to that by directing our attention to the text where Jesus rebuked as wicked and adulterous those who “crave” and “seek” after signs (Matt. 12:39; 16:4; cf. 1 Cor. 1:22). But we must remember that the people he denounces are **unbelieving** scribes and Pharisees, not Christians. These people were desperate for a way to justify their unbelief and rationalize their refusal to follow Jesus. There's no reason why their motivation for seeking signs should be yours or mine.

If our prayers for supernatural power are the fruit of a desire to see God glorified and his people healed, I hardly think Jesus would respond to us as he did the hypocritical religious leaders of his day. When a passion for miraculous gifts is prompted, not by a selfish hankering for the sensational, but by compassion for diseased and despairing souls, God cannot help but be pleased.

All of that brings us today to one of the most amazing things Jesus ever said. It's right here in John 14:12, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to my Father." Virtually everyone is confused, to some degree, by this text. The question is: How do you respond to your confusion?

The Spectrum of Beliefs about Miracles

Before I tell you what I think Jesus means and how we should respond to him, let me set before you **the spectrum of beliefs about miracles**. Be aware that each of these views is embraced by professing Christians. I'm not talking about atheists, but people who claim to know Jesus as Savior and claim to believe the Bible is the Word of God.

(1) At one far end of the spectrum are those who argue that miracles no longer occur. They once did, in biblical times, during the OT, during the life and ministry of Jesus, and during the early church as seen in the book of Acts. But **God no longer works miracles**. Anything that appears to be miraculous can be explained scientifically given enough time and analysis. God always and only operates through normal cause and effect. These people don't deny the reality of the supernatural realm, but they might as well, because anything that anyone might suggest is a miracle often evokes from them condescending scorn. Thus their response to claims for the miraculous is **cynicism**.

(2) Moving a bit farther down the spectrum are those who believe that miracles *might* still occur today, but they are extremely, and I cannot emphasize strongly enough the word *extremely*, rare. Even if miracles might occur today, you should not seek them; you should not pray for them; and your response should be one of heightened *skepticism*. There is a difference between cynicism and skepticism. Cynics are snide and snarky and often treat with scorn anyone who believes in modern day miracles. Skeptics are simply, well, skeptical. They aren't necessarily mean or nasty and they don't typically mock those who believe in miracles.

(3) The third perspective is one that affirms that miracles still happen, but when they do happen they occur *independently of any human involvement*. In other words, God sovereignly works miracles but without the agency of any human being. These are people who believe in miracles but *deny that the spiritual gift of working miracles is still operative in our day*. There are no miracle workers. These people aren't cynical, nor are they skeptical, but they are *doubtful*. It takes a great deal to convince them that a miracle has occurred. This is the view that I embraced for the first 35 years of my life.

(4) The fourth option is the one I embrace today. I believe that miracles still happen. *I believe that the spiritual gift of miracles is still operative in the church*. I believe that this gift is what I call a circumstantial or occasional gift. That is to say, no Christian can work miracles at will, whenever they please, at any time. Any Christian might be given the power to work a miracle at any time, dependent on God's sovereign will and his purpose. Miracles are therefore to be prayed for. The spiritual gift of working miracles is one that we should all seek. Whether or not it is given is entirely up to God. And simply because you receive a gift of working miracles on one occasion does not mean you will always operate or minister at that level of supernatural power. This view is not cynical, not skeptical, or doubtful, but *hopeful* (and prayerful).

(5) The fifth and final option is at the far end of the spectrum from the first view. The first view is that miracles never occur. God never wills to perform supernatural displays of power. This final option argues that God *always* wills to perform miracles in our midst. *Not only does God always will to perform them, he always will perform them*, and if he doesn't, the fault is always ours. How do these people respond to the claim for the occurrence of a miracle? They are not cynical or skeptical or doubtful or even just hopeful. They are often *gullible*. They tend to be naïve and accept without question any and all claims to the miraculous.

Of course, I assume there may well be other options, lying somewhere in between the options I've listed, or perhaps as a mixture of two or more of these views. But our concern today is with how Christians interpret, apply, and respond to John 14:12. I typically come across four interpretations.

Possible Interpretations of John 14:12

Most of the interpretations of John 14:12 are driven by the perceived disparity people feel between what Jesus said would come to pass, on the one hand, and their own experience, on the other. They read this verse and say: "Something's wrong. I don't believe that the followers of Jesus have done the same works Jesus did, far less have they done greater works than he. So how can I navigate around the problem this poses for those of us who believe in the inspiration of the Bible?"

(1) First, some simply reject the text and figure out how to live with a Bible that contains error. I seriously doubt if any of you would adopt such a viewpoint. I certainly hope you don't. In other words, some just give up and concede that Jesus was wrong. Of course, if that is true we've got bigger problems than just what to do with a single difficult passage in Scripture!

(2) Second, the most popular interpretation in our day is that *Jesus' words refer to something other than miraculous deeds and physical healing*.

For example, some have argued that the works Jesus' followers do are "greater" in *number* than those he did (due to the fact that the church is a multitude whereas Jesus is but one). In other words, the word "greater" doesn't point to a qualitative difference but to a quantitative difference. It simply means *more* miraculous works. But this is so patently obvious that it hardly seems necessary for Jesus to assert it.

Others contend that the “greater” works Jesus' followers do is a reference to *evangelistic success* in the number of souls saved. After all, whereas Jesus accomplished much in his earthly ministry, the number of people who came to saving faith while in his physical presence was quite small.

Very similar to this is the idea that the works are “greater” because Jesus worked in only one land whereas his followers work everywhere around the globe. Or perhaps they are “greater” because from this point on they are no longer confined to or flow from only one person. Or again, they are “greater” because Jesus ministered in only a three year span whereas his followers are ministering over several centuries. There is a sense in which all those things are true, but do they really account for what is being said? I don't think so.

(3) A view that I used to embrace, is that if the "works" Jesus did, and promised that believers would do, is a reference to miraculous deeds and physical healings, perhaps the complete fulfillment of this word is *yet future*. If what Jesus said was true, and *everything* he said was true, then surely this promise has yet to see its consummate fulfillment. Could it be that it will happen in our generation? This is possible, and I certainly hope it is true. But the answer may lie elsewhere.

(4) A fourth interpretation appeals to Matthew 11:11 where Jesus says that “the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is *greater* than he [i.e., greater than John the Baptist].” Why are you and I “greater” than John the Baptist? The answer is that, as great as John was, he never experienced the fullness of the blessings of the kingdom of heaven which came through the death and especially the resurrection of Jesus. John's ministry came too early in redemptive history to permit him to participate in the glory of the new age, which Jesus inaugurated. Thus, the works performed *after* Jesus ascends to the right hand of the Father and sends the Spirit are “greater” since they will occur in a different and more advanced phase of God's plan of salvation, being based on Jesus' finished work of redemption.

In support of this view is the last phrase in John 14:12. There Jesus appears to attribute the ability of his followers to do “greater” works to the fact that he is going “to the Father.” In the context of the Upper Room discourse (John 13-17) this clearly points us to the gift of the Holy Spirit that was dependent on his ascension to the Father's right hand (see John 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7).

I think there is a measure of truth in this. Up until the time that Jesus spoke these words in the upper room, no one had been forgiven of their sins based on the finished work of Jesus on the cross and the empty grave. All salvation up to this point had been in anticipation of what would eventually occur. Salvation was based on faith in the *promise* of a coming atonement that would forever put away sin. But once Jesus dies and rises from the dead and goes to his Father and sends the Holy Spirit, salvation is based on faith in the *finished historical fact* of the atonement for sin.

So, what makes the works we do “greater” is that they are done in the aftermath of the final accomplishment of redemption and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. *They are “greater” because they are done in an era or age that doesn't look forward to the payment of a ransom for sin but looks backward at it. The message you preach will be the message not of a promised ransom but a paid ransom, not of a future payment for sin but a finished payment for sin.* The works are “greater” because they are performed in the age of fulfillment, the age of the New Covenant, an age that transcends anything that has come before in God's redemptive purposes.

Unlike anything that has happened up until now, says Jesus, you will do “works” that point people to a finished work of atonement and an empty grave and a risen and glorified Savior and you will do it in the fullness of the Spirit's presence and power.

On this view, these works are “greater” because of *when* they take place, *not* because of *what* they are. They occur in the age of the Spirit. They belong to an age of clarity and power with the ascension of Jesus and the descent of the Spirit and the institution of the New Covenant.

I think this makes sense, especially when we realize that no one can do “greater” miracles than raising the dead and walking on water and turning a handful of fish and loaves into enough food to feed five thousand. So the word “greater” must be accounted for in terms of a movement from the age of anticipation to the age of fulfillment.

What about the same works / equivalent works?

But that doesn't solve everything. We still have to account for the first half of v. 12! Let's set aside for a moment the debate over the meaning of "greater" works and address what Jesus means when he says we will do the "same" or equivalent works.

Several things must be noted. First, those who perform these works are described as "***whoever believes in me.***" This particular Greek phrase in John's gospel always refers to *all* believers, to *any* person who trusts in Christ, whether apostle or average follower (see John 3:15,16,18,36; 6:35,40,47; 7:38; 11:25,26; 12:44,46; 14:12). This is crucial for you to grasp. You don't have to be an apostle or a missionary to do the works of Jesus. You don't have to be a pastor or elder or an author. You don't have to be well known or financially successful. It's not one gender to the exclusion of another. You don't have to be a certain age or of a certain ethnicity. You only have to be a believer.

Second, look closely at the immediate context. Jesus says this in v. 11 – "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else ***believe on account of the works*** themselves." So the words "believe" and "works" occur together in verse 11 just like they do in verse 12. Jesus' works are designed to help people believe. "Believe on account of the works." In effect, Jesus says: "If my teaching or the message I've proclaimed or how I've interacted with people are leaving doubts in your mind about who I am, look at my works. Look at my deeds. Let the works join with my words and lead you to faith." That's what verse 11 says. So the "works" that lead to faith are something more than "words". They are visible deeds of some sort that have the potential to lead someone to faith in Christ. What might those "works" be? That leads to my third point.

Third, the "works" believers are said to perform may well be ***more than*** miraculous deeds and physical healings, but they are certainly ***not less than*** miraculous deeds and healings.

I say this because the Greek word translated "work/s" is used 27 times in the Gospel of John. Five of those refer to the work of God the Father in and through Jesus. Some of these refer to the overall purpose of God in Christ, such as bringing salvation to mankind (such as John 17:4), while others are inclusive of the miracles he performed. Six of the twenty-seven refer to the works or deeds of obedience or disobedience by human beings. ***The remaining sixteen occurrences all refer to the miracles of Jesus.*** It might be possible to argue that a few refer to more than miracles, but every one of them certainly does not refer to anything less than miracles. In other words, miracles are always included.

So, if Jesus is referring to average Christians and not just apostles, and if the "works" in view are miracles, what are we to make of this promise? Before I answer that, let me point out one more important fact.

The promise of Jesus here is not unconditional. Simply because one believes in Jesus does not mean he/she will invariably do the same miraculous deeds that he did. Rather, his point is that the potential for such deeds of supernatural power exists for anyone who is a true believer. But if someone does not believe this text, if someone doubts the reality of the miraculous in our day, if someone denies the on-going operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, if someone lacks any faith or has exceedingly low expectations of what God might do through us today, if someone does not passionately and regularly pray for such works of great power, it is highly unlikely that the works Jesus did will be present in their life and ministry.

We must also remember that the Apostle Paul clearly teaches that ***the spiritual gift of miracles*** is not given to every single Christian. In 1 Corinthians 12:9-10 Paul refers to "gifts of healings" and the "working of miracles" among others. But then he asks these questions in 12:29-30,

"Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?" (1 Cor. 12:29-30).

And the answer Paul is looking for is, No, not all have each of these gifts. Only some do.

So, on the one hand, anyone who believes in Jesus has the potential to do the works he did. But on the other hand not every believer will necessarily do miracles. The possibility is for any of those who believe in Jesus to do these works. Whether or not they do is ultimately up to God.

“OK, Sam,” I can hear you asking in your heart, “what are we to do with this? If Jesus said that those who believe in him will do the same works he did, *why hasn't this happened?*”

Listen closely to me: *It has!* I'll say it again. Most people argue that Jesus can't mean what he seems to mean because we know it hasn't happened. Believers in Jesus have not, in point of fact, done the same works that he did. I disagree. *It has* happened. And *is* happening.

*The Two-Volume Work of Dr. Craig Keener:
“Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts”
(Baker, 2011; 1172 pp.)*

Dr. Craig Keener, whose Ph.D. is from Duke University, is one of the most highly regarded evangelical NT scholars in the world. He is professor of NT at Asbury Theological Seminary. He has written what is widely regarded as the definitive treatment of miracles. It is two volumes, totaling 1,172 pages! He spends the first 250 pages or so defending the reliability of the miracle accounts in the Bible and responds at length to the philosophical and theological arguments that some have used to deny the possibility of the miraculous.

But by far and away the largest portion of these two volumes is devoted to recording and describing miracles of every sort from all around the world during the present church age, with special attention given to the last 150 years or so. He cites documented miracles of healing and deliverance in the Philippines, in Thailand, Viet Nam, in Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Cambodia. Dozens and dozens of documented examples from reliable sources are listed.

He has several hundred examples from churches in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Indonesia, South Korea, the Solomon Islands, Samoa, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, and China. The remarkable growth of the church in China is due in large part to the reality of the supernatural as people are confronted with what they simply can't deny: that there is a supernatural God who answers the prayers of his people.

The cases he cites involve healings of every imaginable sort: cancerous tumors, congenital blindness, deafness, paralysis, heart disease, kidney disease, tuberculosis, and diabetes, just to mention a few. On top of this Keener reports several documented cases of people being raised from the dead.

He proceeds to devote several chapters and a couple of hundred pages to miracle after miracle after miracle in Africa, throughout Latin America, and in the Caribbean. He focuses specifically on the work of Reinhard Bonnke in Nigeria and Heidi Baker in Mozambique, as well as in the Republic of Congo.

The accounts he records from virtually every country in South America are stunning, especially in Ecuador and Chile. He also describes dozens of miracles in Cuba.

At this point in the book, he turns his attention to miracles throughout the entire course of Christian history, beginning in the era immediately following the age of the apostles. People who have argued that when the apostles died, miracles ceased, simply have not looked at the evidence. Keener has, and he describes them in great detail. He chronicles miracles throughout the Middle Ages and even into the time of the Reformation.

In my dialogue over the years with cessationists, people who believe miraculous gifts of the Spirit ceased or died out following the death of the last apostle in the late first century a.d., I often hear them declare with great confidence: “If God intended for spiritual gifts to continue, why did they die out following the death of the Apostle John? Why is it that they are nowhere found in the first several hundred years of the church's history following the apostolic age?” My answer is simple: They didn't disappear! They are present and operative throughout the first five hundred years of church history, and I've thoroughly and meticulously documented such. And so too has Craig Keener.

He describes countless miracles in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries among a wide variety of Protestant traditions. And his examples are from virtually every Protestant denomination: Baptist, Presbyterian, Nazarene, Methodist, Pentecostal, as well as from virtually every theological tradition.

He devotes several hundred pages to documenting a wide variety of healing miracles throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In one ten-page sequence he documents with great detail no fewer than 95 stunning miracles of a wide variety and brings it to a conclusion by saying: “Such accounts represent only a very small sample of the claims” (p. 505).

He turns his attention to healings of blindness and documents more than 350 instances. He also focuses on a variety of types of paralysis that were healed and several dozen instance of resurrections from the dead. And that’s only in Volume 1!

Are *all* the hundreds and hundreds of miraculous claims cited by Keener authentic? Probably not. And he openly concedes that point. But the utmost care was taken in his research and only the most rigorous standards of medical documentation and eye-witness testimony were utilized. Even if there are many instances that ultimately prove to be false, one simply cannot ignore or deny the hundreds, dare I say thousands of cases that Keener cites. And may I remind you that this is only one man’s research. I would not be surprised if dozens of volumes of God’s miraculous work could be written if there were enough time and people available to record them all.

I’m not basing my conclusions solely on Keener’s research. I’ve read dozens of other books that testify to the same truth. I do not base my interpretation of John 14:12 on Keener’s work or that of anyone else. I simply cite Keener’s work as evidential confirmation of what I think John 14:12 clearly asserts.

Conclusion

So what, then, are we to conclude about John 14:12. My answer is two-fold, corresponding to the two halves of the verse. As noted, in the second half of the verse Jesus says his followers will do “greater works” than he did and that this is due to the fact that he is about to go “to the Father.” Thus our works are “greater” not because of their quantity or quality but because they occur under the terms of the superior New Covenant, empowered by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus gave to us in unprecedented fullness on the day of Pentecost.

But in the first half of v. 12 we hear Jesus promise that his followers will do the same or equivalent works that he did. Whereas many try to explain this away, I am confident in saying that what Jesus prophesied has already been fulfilled in the course of church history and is in the process of being fulfilled in our day as well.

Therefore, our response to the possibility of the miraculous, in whatever form it might occur, is not to be cynical, skeptical, doubtful, or gullible. We must instead, at all times, be prayerful and hopeful.