

A Beautiful Picture

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Preacher: Rob Attridge

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. So great to see you all this morning. Well, this morning we are continuing our series in the book of Acts. And that means this morning we are coming to Acts chapter 4, and we're going to be looking together at verses 32 to 37.

So Acts chapter 4, verses 32 to 37. And I'm going to read that passage for us now.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there was no needy persons among them.

For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, and put it at the apostles' feet.

[1 : 06] And it was distributed to anyone who had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Well, I want to start this morning by asking you a question. What is the most beautiful picture that you have ever seen?

Just think about that just for a moment or two. What is the most beautiful picture? What is the most beautiful painting that you have ever seen? We've all seen paintings before, but I'm just wondering, have you ever considered what is the most beautiful one that you have ever seen?

It might be a painting that you have at home. It might be something you saw in a museum or a gallery. It might even be one that you have done yourself.

And by the way, just in case you're wondering, believe it or not, this is not one that I have done myself. Just in case you're wondering. But what is the most beautiful picture that you have ever seen?

[2 : 26] Well, if one comes to mind, or even just as you look at this one, I'm sure that as you think about that painting, or as you even just look at this one, I'm sure you can think of or you can see just the beautiful colors, the textures, the shades of that painting.

And I know there's some great artists in the church, so maybe it is one you've done yourself. But the reason why I mention beautiful paintings or pictures this morning is this.

When I first looked at our passage for this morning, the very first thing that came to my mind was, wow, what a beautiful painting, what a beautiful picture, what a beautiful portrait.

We're given in these verses of the early church, of a community of God's people operating at their very best. Each detail that we're given in these verses is like another bright stroke of color that contributes to just such a wonderful, positive picture of this community of believers of the early church operating at their very best.

Sadly, probably at times, an honest painting or portrait of church might not always be that positive or vibrant.

[4 : 03] But in contrast to that, what we see here, what Luke shares with us here, is such a wonderful, positive picture of church, of God's people operating at their beautiful best.

But with that in mind this morning, I just want to highlight, as we look at this beautiful picture, I just want to highlight four bright strokes of color, if you like, four characteristics that contribute to this beautiful picture of church.

And as we look at these things, with the Lord's help, these things will continue to be more and more part of our picture here at Amazing Grace. Well, the first characteristic, the first stroke of color that we see in these verses that contribute to such a wonderful, positive picture of church church is unity.

At the beginning of verse 32, we read, all the believers were one in heart and mind. Now, being one in heart and mind really points to a comprehensive unity.

You know, sometimes we might hear of people when they're making decisions, and they might say something like, will I go with my heart or will I go with my head?

[5 : 35] You know, will I go with my heart or will I go with my mind? And the implication with that is, at times, the head and the heart might say two different things.

The implication is, at times, the head and the heart might go in two different directions. Well, incredibly, here, we're told that they were one in heart and head.

Here, they're one in heart and mind. And that really is a comprehensive unity. And this level of unity really is incredible when we consider that at this point, including women and children, there was probably likely over 20,000 believers in the early church.

We're told in chapter 4, verse 4, that there was about 5,000 men who had believed at this point. Well, as we said, I think, a few weeks ago, if we add women and children to that, there was so many more than just 5,000.

You know, as we might say in West Cork, there was such a big gang of them there, but yet, they had this incredible unity in both heart and mind among them.

[6 : 59] Thousands of different personalities, thousands of different characters, thousands of different strengths, thousands of different weaknesses, and just like us all, not one of them were perfect.

But yet, amazingly, they were one in heart and mind because they all had one great, wonderful thing in common that united them all together.

They had all been saved, forgiven, set free by the Lord Jesus through His death and resurrection. They'd all been made new creations in Christ.

They'd all received the Holy Spirit. And so it was in Christ, through the Spirit, in truth, that they were united in heart and mind.

And what amazing strength this unity in Christ, through the Spirit, in truth, would bring them. When we were looking at the early church in chapter 2, we noted that the church together would be stronger to face whatever challenges or persecution that might come their way than if they were all pulling in different directions doing their own thing.

[8 : 19] The church is stronger together. And I like this. Someone said, in many ways, the church is like a bunch of snowflakes.

So imagine that. We're all a bunch of snowflakes. Each individual snowflake created beautifully unique. But any snowflake is frail by itself.

So a church of individual snowflakes that don't stick together, well, that church is in danger of melting away. However, if the church does stick together, if the snowflakes do stick together, well, something very powerful can be formed.

Like an avalanche, the church that sticks together in Christ, through the Spirit, in truth, can powerfully move forward with great momentum.

So let us be an avalanche. Let us not be a bunch of individual snowflakes. So a key stroke of color, a key ingredient that we see in these verses that contributes to a positive picture of church at its best is unity in Christ.

[9 : 32] It's unity in Christ, true to Spirit, and it has to be in truth. A strong church is a united church. Well, a second characteristic, a second stroke of color that we see in these verses that contributes to a wonderful, positive picture of church is power.

Power. And of course, that is God's power. Verse 33, with great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Jesus. This great power that was at work in them and among them was not a power of their own. It was God's great power working in them and through them.

They'd all receive the Holy Spirit, and God's power through the Spirit is at work among them. and this power is enabling them to continue to testify to their risen Savior.

Despite what persecution might come their way, God's power was at work in them, helping them to continue to hold to the truth and to continue to point to their risen Savior.

[10 : 59] A positive church is a church that relies on God's power and not their own to continue to point to Jesus and hold to the truth in the community that they are in.

So God's great power is another rich stroke of color on the canvas of this beautiful picture of church being at its best. Well, a third characteristic, a third stroke of color that contributes to this wonderful, positive picture of church that Luke gives us here in these verses is grace.

The second half of verse 33, you'll see, and God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all.

Just like God's power was at work among them, here we're told that God's grace was powerfully at work in them all. folks, for church to be at its beautiful best, it needs to be saturated in grace.

And that seems to be the case here for the believers in the early church. These early church believers at this point seemed to clearly understand the grace that they had received from the Lord Jesus, Jesus, and that grace, God's grace, was powerfully at work in them all.

[12 : 34] well, when God's grace is powerfully at work in us, it absolutely creates a culture of grace for each other.

And this culture of grace for each other would have been so needed in that, again, all of these believers were different, none of them were perfect, so God's grace powerfully at work in them, fostering a culture of grace for each other would have been so needed for them just to even exist together and for them to press on together.

Grace is such a wonderful stroke of color in church being at its beautiful best. As someone said, when church is great, grace is abounding.

well, a final characteristic, a final stroke of color that we see in these verses that contributes to a wonderful positive picture of church is care.

Care for each other and care for the church. And the care for each other and the care for the church that we see in these verses on this occasion is expressed through generous giving.

[14 : 05] Verses 34 to 37. There were no needy persons among them for from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, sold the field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

In the early church there clearly was a culture, a strong care for each other and the church. And as I said, this care for each other and the church on this occasion in these verses is expressed through generous giving.

We're told here about some who had a field, had some houses. Barnabas was one of them.

Barnabas sold the field as did others from time to time and they brought this money and they laid it at the feet of the apostles.

It was given to the apostles and they were to use it accordingly. This in many ways is like giving to the church today. When something is given to the church, it's the responsibility of the elders along with the help of the members to use it accordingly.

[15 : 30] Now here is the thing. I don't think that these verses are telling us all to go now and to sell a field or a house and give it away.

That is what some did in these verses. And I'm sure that that was a great blessing. And it is what some do today and I'm sure that that is a big blessing.

But for us all, I don't think that the takeaway from these verses is we must all go and sell something and give it away. No, I think that the takeaway from these verses, from this section in these verses, is for us all to have a deep care for each other and for the church by being at the very least generous with what the Lord has given us.

I think the takeaway from these verses is to have a deep care for each other and the church by being generous with our time, with our serving, with our gifts, with our finances, with our abilities, and with anything else that we have to give and to offer.

As someone said, looking at these verses, and I think they summed it up well, everybody tightly holding on to everything that they have, saying, this is mine, is not the picture of church that we see in the New Testament.

[17 : 07] whether it be time, finances, gifts, abilities, our service, hospitality, whatever it is, let us be generous with all that the Lord has given to us.

I think that's the takeaway from these verses, to have a generous care for each other and for the church. What does church look like at its best?

Well, I think that this passage paints a pretty good picture. Or at the very least, it paints a pretty good start. Unity in Christ through the Spirit in truth, God's power at work among them, helping

them to continue to point to their risen Savior, God's grace powerfully at work in them, fostering a grace for each other, and a culture of generous care for each other and the church.

These things, like bright strokes of color on a canvas, contribute to a wonderful, beautiful picture of church, a community of God's people at their best.

And this is the picture that Luke gives us. Of course, he could have said all sorts of other things, but this is what we're given in Scripture. This is the picture of church that we're given in Scripture in this passage in Acts chapter 4.

[18 : 49] And you know what? These things are here for us as a church to experience and to express today every bit as much as they were back then in the book of Acts.

I think that there can be an idea out there that church was at its best at the beginning. As if to say that the church was at its best in the book of Acts, and then from that point it's kind of gotten worse and worse and worse, and that's just the way it is.

Well, I'm convinced that church can be at its best today every bit as much as it was in the book of Acts. The church with Christ as the head can be at its best in every age.

I think we have to believe that. We have to believe that the church can be at its best in every age. In fact, I am so thankful to the Lord to see so many of these positive things in us as a church today.

If our portrait was painted as a church, we are not perfect, and there is always room to grow, but I am convinced that all of these things would be in some part part of our picture today.

[20 : 20] because the reality is you are a wonderful group of believers. Whether you've been coming a long time or just a week, you are a wonderful group of believers.

You are a wonderful church. And I am so thankful, I really am, to our Lord for every single one of you, as are the other elders.

I am so thankful that we can see so many, all of these things in us as a church today.

And to God be the glory for that. So my encouragement to us as we look at these verses is let us be encouraged.

Let us be encouraged that these things are part of our picture today as a church. Let us be encouraged that the Lord has helped us in so many ways for these things to be part of our picture.

[21 : 25] And with that being the case, may that encouragement kind of propel us forward with a desire for each one of us to see these things more and more as an ever-increasing, ever-growing part of our picture.

Because we can never have too much of a good thing. We can never have too much of these things. And there is always room to grow.

So, in closing, let us be encouraged with where the Lord has brought us. Let us be encouraged that these things are part of our picture. And with his help, may that encouragement help us to not stop seeking to grow more and more in these things.

So that when a watching and hurting world looks in, they will see and experience something not perfect, but something that is truly beautiful, encouraging, and life-giving.

Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for what your word shows us and highlights to us. And we thank you for this little snapshot tucked in in the end of chapter four of the book of Acts, that we get this picture of what church looked like in the early church.

[22 : 58] And we thank you for the unity that they had. We thank you for how they operated, not in their own strength, but in your strength. We thank you for the grace that they had for each other, and we thank you for the care that they had for each other.

And Lord, I pray that you would just take these things and you'd help us to continue to grow us in these things. And Lord, I just want to give you praise and thanks for each person here.

Thank you for how you have moved and worked among us. Thank you that these things are part of our picture, and we give you the glory for that, but help us to grow even more, for your glory, and I pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.