

Habits of a healthy church: 'A healthy church is a generous church'

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Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 01] Now we're going to continue our series, thinking about habits of a healthy church from the book of Acts. Our third habit is that of giving. And we're going to see that a healthy church is a generous church.

Again, we've got a few texts that we will look at together to show us this truth. Let me begin by making a statement, I suppose, that Christians, as we read in the Bible, are called to give generously and joyfully, to support God's work, and to provide for the needy in response to God's generous grace in Christ.

And what we'll see as we look at the book of Acts, as we look at the New Testament and the Old Testament, is that giving is a gospel issue. In light of the fact that the Father, in his loving kindness, has given us his Son to be our Savior, that Jesus has come and he's left the glory of heaven to become one of us, has given his life to be our Savior, that the Father and the Son have given us eternal life and given us the Spirit to live in our hearts.

That's our motivation for generous giving. So God's grace fuels our generosity. Jesus said our giving is a heart issue.

Remember in the Sermon on the Mount, he talked about where our treasure is. That's where our heart will be also. So that money can be a barrier to our worship.

[1 : 35] Jesus would say that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom. But our money can also be a way that we show that we have been changed by God's love and it can be a way to bless others.

That we can use money to serve other people. So the way that we spend, the way that we consume, the Bible would say, is a matter of the heart. Two letters to talk about before we get to the book of Acts.

The first from the early 4th century, Emperor Julian, who was no friend of the Christian faith. He said this, there's a little bit of his letter up there.

He said, when it came about that the poor were neglected by the pagan priests, the Christians observed this fact and devoted themselves to philanthropy.

They support not only their own poor, but ours as well. All men see that our people lack aid from us. And it's really interesting to look at the early centuries of the Christian church and how one of the major reasons, I think, why it had such an impact within the Roman Empire was the fact that not only was the Christian community caring for themselves, they were also caring for others.

[2 : 57] Where the pagan priests were failing, the Christians were caring. Second, mercy and mission went together from the earliest days of the Christian church. Second letter, much closer to home, from Manuel, Manuel Reanu, who we support in our mission support fund just last month in March.

Another example, lovely example of God's providence. So he was talking to a young pastor, anxious pastor, wondering how he was going to look after his family with a very unstable income working for the church.

And so he was asking Manuel for advice. Should he leave his calling in order to seek a more stable source of income? And Manuel's advice was to trust that God would provide for his daily needs and for what his family needed, that he shouldn't set aside his calling, but rather he should continue to pastor and he should trust God to provide.

And then Manuel said 20 minutes after that chat, he got an email from us as a church to tell him that we were just beginning to provide financial support for Manuel month after month.

And this is what Manuel said. He said this was for him a divine confirmation of God's constant generous care. God caring as people give.

[4 : 24] Let's get into the book of Acts together. We're going to go back to that passage that we've been in a few times. Acts chapter 2, verses 42 to 45.

We'll find the words are up on our screen. To think about this idea that giving, the giving of Christians expresses fellowship. Acts 2, verse 42.

They devoted themselves, these first Christians who were converted after Peter preached at Pentecost, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

So this first church, as we thought about before, they're devoted to fellowship. And one way they expressed it was in this generous sharing. It's that kind of mindset. What's mine is yours.

[5 : 25] When you read the Gospels, we discover that Jesus had a common purse. That was looked after by Judas to meet the needs of the disciples. And it seems like the church continues with this mindset. And certainly the wealthy are selling land and possessions and giving to meet the needs of others.

And so again, from the beginning, this unity that they have in the Spirit, this unity that they have because they are the body of Christ, finds practical expression. That their fellowship extends to financial care.

It's a reminder, again, that from the beginning, faith touches our wallets. So it's clearly impacting their spending and their consumption. And it's also reminding us that from the beginning, the Christian faith and the Christian church was a community religion.

They were thinking of themselves as a fellowship, as a body together. And that was, as we said already, part of the power of the early church witness.

The sacrificial voluntary giving to care for the needs of one another. And that is something that you can see still today.

[6 : 36] Something that has great power still today. Giving to express fellowship. So because we had family who were serving as missionaries in the Philippines, we got to know some different missionary families.

And there was this one family who were serving among a remote tribal group called the Mung Young people. It lived up in the hills on a small island. Well, they heard about...

So the Philippines is very poor. And the Philippines also has annual typhoon season. And so those really rickety, poorly put together houses often destroyed. And so this church up in the hills and this island over here discovered that when typhoon season came, it really impacted heavily on a coastal town on another island.

And their response, poor as they were, was to get a boat full of rice and to send it to that island as a way to show care and support.

giving the only thing that they could in order to express their fellowship as the body of Christ. The Free Church, a number of weeks ago, we decided that we would partner with Blysewood in their Ukraine appeal.

[7 : 52] And I don't know if you've been keeping up with that appeal, but they've raised over half a million pounds to date. And again, what's going on there is that the Christian church here in Scotland, through Blysewood, has partners in Poland and surrounding countries.

And so that giving is meeting the needs of the poor and the suffering, and it's standing as a mark of fellowship also. And of course, that doesn't have to just be in the realm of finance.

Think about what happens perhaps when a family in the church has a new baby, or there's someone who's sick in the congregation, and people make the time to make some meals and to deliver those meals.

Again, that's a giving that expresses fellowship. So whether our giving is local or global, whether it's money or time or resources, we need to think about giving and fellowship and that vital connection, supporting one another as the family of Christ.

We see it here from the beginning. In Acts chapter 4, verse 32 to 37, we see something similar, but we also are invited to see what motivates their giving.

[9 : 07] So let's turn there next, Acts 4, verse 32 to 37, where we read, 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 person 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 a field he owned, and brought the money, and put it at the apostles' feet.

So Luke likes to record summary sections in the book of Acts. There's one, Acts 2, 42 to 47. These verses here are another summary, and what we see summarized is the impact of God's grace on this early Christian church.

[10 : 22] Verse 32, They are one in heart and mind. They are one in Christ. They are one by the Spirit. And then we discover in verse 33 and 34 that God's grace is powerfully at work in them.

And how is that demonstrated? It's demonstrated in the way that they are caring for the poor. So God's powerful love to them through Jesus in the good news of the gospel is leading the early church to then sell possessions to care for the needy.

So there's a connection between the work of God in Jesus and their work of caring for their poor. And there's a wonderful impact here as we think of their words and testimony to the risen Lord Jesus in verse 33.

They're continuing to testify powerfully to the reality that Jesus died and rose again for them, giving them new life and salvation. And there's powerful deeds and service as these wealthy believers are sacrificing for the sake of others.

Just as we thought about with Zacchaeus in the book of Luke. God's grace fueling generous sacrificial giving.

[11 : 49] These early Christians, they understand that the impact of the truth of the gospel, that Jesus loved me and gave himself for me, and that's clearly transforming their hearts and motivating generosity.

That's something that we see whenever Jesus changed people's lives. Like Luke chapter 7, verse 36 to 50 is a wonderful example.

The sinful woman who anoints Jesus with perfume. That perfume recognized by scholars most likely representing her life savings. And there it is smashed and poured at the feet of Jesus in response to the extravagant grace that she had received from her Savior and Lord.

As Jesus said, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven as her great love has shown. So there is a principle that is established here connected to our giving.

Before we give, as we give, as we consider our giving, we meditate and reflect first on God's giving to us of the Lord Jesus. That we would allow that to be shaping our heart and shaping then our response of giving.

[13 : 12] We can continue to Acts chapter 6 and verses 1 to 7. And again, we see the church active in caring for the poor.

But this time, with a slightly different focus, let's think about giving as mercy ministry. Acts chapter 6, verse 1 to 7. In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews, among them, complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.

We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

[14:40] So here we're invited to see some tensions emerging in the early church. We know that there are large numbers of new Christians and many of them are needy.

And so these two groups of widows from different cultures and the minority group, the Hellenistic Greek culture widows, are being overlooked.

Not necessarily deliberately, it could just be force of numbers. But what's happening here is that poor administration and organization is leading to grumbling and is indeed a threat to the unity of this early church.

And so how do the apostles respond? Verse 2, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.

Now it's important not to imagine that the apostles are saying, well, it's not any concern of ours. It's not a priority for us. They're saying it is a priority for the church and that's clear because they want to organize, to administer.

[15:49] They're just saying it's not our priority. What's their priority for the apostles? Verse 4, we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

That's their primary calling, to teach, to preach, to pray. And so what they do is they ask the church to appoint servants. We often look at this text to give the basis for the office of deacon.

And these seven, interestingly, many of whom have Greek names, perhaps coming from a Hellenistic background themselves, these seven are chosen to oversee this mercy ministry to make sure that none of the widows are being overlooked.

God orders, commands his church to care for the widows and the orphans and so these seven are appointed to make sure that that happens.

Verse 3 is interesting. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. The church needed men filled with the Spirit, men of wisdom, both for the pastoral ministry and the preaching ministry and the practical ministry within the church.

[17:07] And Luke records for us the outcome when each focuses as they are gifted. Verse 7, the word of God spread and the number of disciples increased rapidly.

So the apostles continue to preach and teach and then these deacons help to make sure that the practical needs are being met and the church continues to grow.

people. And just while we're on this text, which is a really important text for a number of reasons, but it's certainly important for helping us to understand our own church practice of elders and deacons and as we will soon be ordaining a new elder and some new deacons, it's helpful for us to stop and think about how tasks are divided.

And what do we see here is that the apostles represent the work of the eldership, that we are committed to words and prayer within the church and the deacons support that work by focusing in a spiritual way on practical ministry.

And that includes making sure that the needs of others are met, that we are well organized, that we can be caring for one another as a church family. And so perhaps even as we think about ordaining new people, it's a reminder that we can be praying for our elders and for our deacons, that we would have these two focuses, foci, in our church, that we would function well, to serve well.

[18:55] But giving is a mercy ministry. Perhaps some of you remember meeting a guy called Sashko, a church planter working in Poland.

He came to our weekend away a few years ago and I just got a newsletter from him this week. And so he's got a very small church in Krakow, but they're taking in a lot of refugees from Ukraine. and so his little church has mobilized and they're providing meals every day and they've got a children's daycare center that they've just set up and they're taking in clothes and giving those clothes out and they're giving family support.

And in God's providence, he's from Ukraine, so he speaks Ukrainian, so he's able to teach the kids Bible stories, he's able to share God's word with families. And there's a wonderful picture there in Krakow of God's people both sharing the gospel and helping people's practical needs.

It's a really biblical pattern. And so we can pray for folks like Sashko and many others who are engaged in the front line right now, reminding us that giving is a mercy ministry.

[20:15] The last text from the book of Acts that we're going to look at, we'll jump forward to Acts chapter 11 and verse 25 to 30. This brings us to the church in Antioch.

So Acts chapter 11 at verse 25. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and

taught great numbers of people.

The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and through the spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world.

This happened during the reign of Claudius. The disciples as each one was able decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

So here we're being introduced to the Antioch church, a largely Gentile church, a church that has been well taught by Barnabas and then by Saul solidly teaching for a year there.

[21 : 26] The outsiders were calling them Christians, not necessarily a term of endearment but a sign that it was evident who they belonged to and who they worshipped.

And to this church comes this warning from Agabus about a famine, a famine that came in the 40s AD and their response is so interesting because their response is that they are going to look to provide for mother church, the church in Judea.

And so everyone who gives as they are able and this gift is to be organized by Barnabas and Saul. Now why did they choose to give to Judea? Well perhaps they appreciated that famine would be a particularly big problem in that region.

Perhaps they'd heard that there are large numbers of poor Christians living in Jerusalem. We just saw it in Acts 6. Perhaps they knew that the Christians there in the heart of the Jewish nation would likely be cut off from Jewish food distribution.

That was what happened. That's something that we hear today as well. Persecuted Christians will testify living in poorer countries that often they miss out on food distribution, aid distribution because of their faith.

[22 : 46] We're not told the reason why they're motivated to give to Judea but nevertheless they do. Maybe it's simply because the Jerusalem church had given so much.

The apostles came from there. The gospel emanated from there. And perhaps they knew that the church in Jerusalem had been suffering much in terms of exclusion and would face famine.

And so their instinct is let's help. Let's not just leave them to it. Let's help. And so their giving is an expression of church unity. This church in Antioch who most likely never met anybody in the church in Judea aimed to alleviate their suffering as a way to promote unity, to put their faith into action for the sake of the body of Christ.

Christ. I really like the way Ajit Fernando puts it. So Ajit Fernando works for Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka. He's the director of that mission. And he says the body of Christ mentality should be that when one part is pinched we must say, ow, that hurts.

There should be a real living connection within the body of Christ. Christ. So whether that's Ukraine or India or Afghanistan, whatever, when one part suffers we all suffer.

[24 : 13] And as we see here from Acts 11, it also gives us the opportunity to give, to look to support, to show and demonstrate church unity. I think for us as a local congregation it's one of the reasons why we chose to set up our mission support fund, which just began at the start of the year.

It's a way to express our unity and to show love to the Reannels over in Colombia, and as we look to be a mother church in Galashios. It's a way for us in a very tangible way to express church unity and commitment to those very different ministries in different parts of the world.

John Piper puts it this way, the ministry and mission of the church is at the center of Christian giving. And it's what you see time and again in the book of Acts.

Now we're going to leave Acts for the moment and we're going to turn in our Bibles to 1 Corinthians the end of chapter 15 and into chapter 16 because here we have a really important set of principles in this very short practical section.

Just before this we have Acts chapter 15 where Paul speaks much about the resurrection of Christ and the reality of our resurrection bodies.

[25 : 40] And then in chapter 15 verse 58 he says, Therefore my dear brothers and sisters stand firm, let nothing move you, always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

Now about the collection for the Lord's people, do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving up so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

Then when I arrive I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also they will accompany me.

And so just to start there in verse 58 he says therefore therefore in light of Jesus' resurrection he says two things is hold on to gospel truth and dedicate yourself to gospel work.

He reminds us as Christians that we have hope and purpose our labour in the Lord is not in vain because of the resurrection and then he immediately moves from there to think about this collection that they are to give for the Lord's people and perhaps we are to understand that one of those labours in the Lord is giving to serve the needs of others.

[27 : 08] Five questions that we can ask in this little section that can help us towards five principles for our giving. First question why should Christians give?

Two reasons we find in here. the first is implicit the second more explicit perhaps. Verse two on the first day of every week each one of you should set aside a sum of money.

The first day of the week the day when Christians worship their giving was to be part of their worship was something they did on the first day of the week this new day of worship a day that changed because of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Verse three I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. this is voluntary this gift it's the language of grace not demand it's a reminder again that our giving flows from the gospel act of worship response to grace Jesus Andy Stanley who writes really helpfully says God's extravagant generosity towards us compels us to be extravagantly generous towards others so why should we give we should give as our worship we should give because of grace who should give that's dealt with here verse two each one of you should set aside a sum of money every follower of Jesus recognizing this church like every church is made up of rich and poor mixed group but if

Jesus is Lord and it all belongs to him we are all asked to give as part of our faith where should we give it's also dealt with here and this is interesting there is that reference to setting aside a sum of money and then the church collecting it and then we discover in verse 3 that it will be sent with your gift to Jerusalem so we give both in church and for church our generosity begins with the church family we are to give to serve the church family again it's a reminder of the way that generosity unites churches part of the way our Presbyterianism works is our financial sharing supporting the strong supporting the weak so we give in church and we give for the church when should we give how often should we give we can find that there too here's the principle on the first day of every week so it's a reminder that for

[30 : 18] Paul in the Bible the expectation is we give regularly it's normal and ongoing it's not a one-off based on emotional appeal it's not a one-off based on well I happened to get a bonus this month so I've got a bit more disposable income no we're invited to give regularly how much should we give maybe that's the question we're all waiting for and verse two gives us guidance there each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income it's interesting isn't it there's no percentage set in the Old Testament they spoke of the tithe but there's no percentage level there it's a helpful reminder that then and now in a mixed congregation people have very different levels of income for somebody who is struggling to survive 10% might be a bridge too far someone who is very affluent 10% may be far too low even within the

Old Testament when there was the tithing requirement that was always just at a base level there was also free will offerings there was also first fruit offerings so there was the floor set but there was never a ceiling set and you find those different times especially around the building of the tabernacle and the temple the people were giving so much and so generously that the priest actually had to say whoa stop we've got enough and more than enough and talk about a tithe but there is talk on a generous joyful sacrificial in response to God's grace to us in the Lord Jesus Tim Keller the pastor in New York made the observation a number of years ago that this side of the cross as we have known more of God's grace as we have seen how God's salvation comes to pass in the sending of his own son

Jesus he asked the question of his church should we give less than an Old Testament believer in light of greater grace that we have received how much should we give we should give in keeping with our income that then becomes a matter of good stewardship and a matter of our own conscience doesn't it but what we can see in the book of Acts as we see the church grow we can appreciate really clearly that a healthy church is a generous church and that makes sense if we return to why we give if our giving is in response to God's giving then a healthy church is a church

that delights in the gospel where our treasure is in heaven because our treasure is Jesus and it's that heart and it's that mindset that makes it easier to give it motivates generosity for mercy and mission let me close

I guess with a word of thanks as well as a call to reflect because as a church we are to be thankful we're coming towards the end of pandemic thankful that many have been generous in an ongoing way that God has looked after us through pandemic that our finances haven't taken a huge hit and a dip that people have responded maybe giving differently than the past finding different ways to give and so as church leaders we are thankful for that but I think it gives us a chance to reflect first and especially as we're around Easter to reflect on the generous sacrificial grace shown to us in Jesus and then to reflect on our own giving is it a response of worship I think that's one of the challenges maybe this is just me but when we give by direct debit it's a real challenge is my response worship or is just another amount of money that comes out of the bank at the start of the month is my giving fueled by an understanding of all that God has done for me in Jesus the fact that he's made me part of his body part of his kingdom and is that fueling our response well let's leave that there and let's pray together Lord once again we want to thank you for your generous grace towards us in the Lord Jesus we know that we do not deserve your mercy we do not deserve to be called children of God we do not deserve to have our sins forgiven we do not deserve the promise of eternal life but by trusting in the person and the work of the Lord Jesus all of these benefits and so many more come freely to us Lord we pray that more and more you would be reminding us of these wonderful truths and that that would help us then to think about how to respond with our giving whether that's our money or our time or other resources

[36 : 16] Lord we pray that our giving would be a practical demonstration of that fellowship that we have that being part of a body of Christ that means we'd be on the lookout for ways that we can serve others by giving in different ways Lord we pray that our giving would be a means for us extending mercy to others Lord we are aware that there are so many challenges that people are facing around the world and within our own country there are increasing economic challenges to come Lord we pray that you would give us hearts that are mobilized for mercy ministry Lord we pray thanking you for our deacons and the prospect of new deacons thanking you for our women's pastoral team thanking you for everyone who is on the lookout for how to extend mercy

Lord we pray to be known as a community of mercy Lord we thank you too that our giving can express our unity with brothers and sisters in Christ in different parts of the world and for us as a local church we thank you for that unity that we have with Manuel and Patty in Colombia and with Craig and Amy and the future church plant in Galashios Lord we ask to be good partners for them to be praying for them to be concerned about them to be taking an interest in those different ministries taking place across different continents and Lord may you use our small gifts to do great things in your kingdom Lord we pray that you'd help us to reflect on the teaching of your word so that we might be generous givers because of your generosity to us we pray in Jesus name Amen and now as we close we'll sing the hymn take my life and let it be and we will stand and we will sing together k things they they are they