

Irrationally Generous: Giving

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Date: 12 March 2023

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- [0 : 0 0] Thank you, Beatrice. Morning. Morning. Good to be in God's house once again.
- Good to be with you. Keep talking until you can hear me now. Yes, no, maybe so. No, no, I'm still seeing some head shakes.
- No, no. Hey, diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle. La, la, la, la, la, la, la, la. There we go. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Are we good? Yes, good.
- Amen. Thank you again for leading us, and thank you again for inviting me to fellowship with you, to pause before God and to listen to his words.
- We continue in the series that you're looking at, looking at, you know, who we are as the people of God. The theme I'm choosing to use today, hallmarks of a healthy church, freedom, generosity, and the fear of God, all of which we've seen in the passage we've just read.
- [1 : 1 7] Do you know, if the book of Acts had been published today, in today's society, it might just have hit the bestseller list.
- If you haven't read it recently, I encourage you to have a look. See, it would have its appeal because of its stories, stories of life, various parts of the empire, its entertaining adventures, travel stories, shipwreck, castaway.
- It's full of vivid characters, and some impressive speeches as well. On the whole, I think it's a rather fascinating book.
- I commend it to you. Don't worry. I know I always give homework, and that's the homework this time, you know, read the book of Acts. But you see, the stories found in Acts are neither nihilistic legends, nor illegal presents.
- For the Christian, they are like flagships, signposts, banners, telling us something about the beginnings of and the nature of this organization to which we belong, the church.
- [2 : 4 5] In the opening chapters of Acts, we read about the disciples praying together. We read about the coming of the Holy Spirit, the conversion of thousands, even in one day.
- And as we read further, we discover that the early church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.
- Praising God, enjoying the favor of all the people. We see that in Acts 2, verses 41 to 47. We discover very early that a relationship began to develop between these people in Acts.
- Today, I want us to pause and look even closer at the nature of this relationship that existed within this community called the church, to look at what is described as the hallmarks of a healthy church.
- To do this, I want us to look together on that passage, that last reading that we've just heard, Acts 4, 32 to chapter 5, verse 11.
- [4 : 0 5] I am sure we are very familiar with this story. Immediately on listening to and reading that passage, there are several things that come to mind, some of which were echoed in the prayer we just heard, prayed earlier.

But I want us to focus on these four, the first of which is a reminder of one of your sermons a few weeks ago. Fellowship, freedom, generosity, and the fear of God.

What a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning on the... We sing that sometimes, don't we? Yeah, good, good. What do we mean, though, by fellowship?

Or more to the point, what did the early church mean by fellowship? Well, if we look in contemporary dictionaries, like, for instance, the Collins Shorter English Dictionary.

I don't know why they call it short. It's about this thick. Shorter English Dictionary. It says things like, fellowship is the state of sharing mutual interests.

[5 : 16] Mutual activities. A society of people sharing mutual interests together. Companionship. Friendship. But when we look in Acts, we see that this meant not just people sharing mutual interests and activities, but people sharing their very lives and their possessions so that no one went in need.

if this is correct, and I do believe it is, then what was happening in Acts was that a group of people having been called out by God, the ecclesia, the called out ones, the church, they have had their lives radically readjusted.

I use the word radical here because I think we all know by now that one of the first words a child learns to use is the word mine.

That is, of course, after they learn to say no. That's probably because we say no to them so many times. No, no, mine, mine. And although we learn to disguise this as adults, the instinct is still there, I suggest.

Does this sound familiar? It's my life. It's my time, or my time is my own. It's my house, my car.

[6 : 49] I am a self-made man or woman. I'm emphasizing this because I want us to understand the radical concept that the early church had concerning the things that they possessed.

The coming of the Holy Spirit reversed that deep-seated human drive for self-preservation and replaced it with a deep care, deep concern for others.

too often in today's society when we get together, it's only to share mutual interests and activities, not the sharing of much else.

In the early church, they shared their possessions, yes, and they also shared their lives. Look around you.

No, I mean that. Look around you. You know the persons sitting near you, behind you, around you. It's all right. I don't want you to answer. I just want you to look.

[7 : 57] Fellowship, sharing of our lives. It's what the early church did. The second thing we see in this passage is that sense of freedom.

I don't want to highlight this again, but what, again, what does it mean? I, again, turned to the Collins shorter, not so short, English dictionary, and it said this. Liberty means personal liberty, or freedom means personal liberty, as from slavery, liberation, as from confinement or bondage, the equality or state of being free, free especially, it says, to enjoy political and civil liberties, liberties, or the power to order one's own actions.

When we look at Acts and those passages we just read and in verse 33 of chapter 4, the believers in Acts cared for one another as an act of grace or as a result of the fruit of grace.

Grace is God giving us what we don't deserve, access to him, that freedom to come into his presence. Mercy means he doesn't treat us as our sins deserve.

Fruit of grace, not love. They acted, in other words, in freedom because of this grace. When you read this passage, you don't see anybody commanding them to do this or to do that or that things should be done in a particular way.

[9 : 41] Somehow, having received the grace of God, having been set free by the grace of God as the old song would say, they discovered that sense of freedom to come together and to do and to be.

I want to suggest that unless we begin to embrace again that freedom that God's grace brings as a church, as we again come to understand the significance of community life, of sharing with each other, of caring for one another, of allowing ourselves to be cared for by each other.

Not just the pastor, which is a good thing, really, since you don't have one right now. Such an unkind statement.

But unless we allow ourselves to be cared for by one another or we care for one another, then there will continue to be this tremendous cost to our leaders and to their families, to their spouses and to their children especially.

We need to build a community, to become a community, a community of people who look out for each other. And this is even more important now as you go through this interregnum.

[11 : 05] But it's also true when you do appoint a new pastor, being a community that acts in freedom to love, to honor, to support one another.

Yes, in a sense, your time is your own to do with as you please, but having given your life over to Jesus Christ, for him, he is your Lord.

He is our Lord. And that means he owns you. He is your master. And if he owns me, I can no longer say my time is my own.

It's his. I'm an Arsenal supporter. I'm an Arsenal supporter. And a few years ago, we brought some world-class players with great individual skills, ball control, good touches, and so on.

But we won nothing. It was not until they began to learn the importance of playing together that good things started to happen.

[12 : 37] They're a joy to watch now, the way they are together, the way they understand one another, the way they come united. If you've never seen them, they're on today at two o'clock, so you get...

There were loads of individual brilliance and individual skills, but until they learned to trust one another and to play together, they weren't winning anything.

They weren't good to look at or to watch. I want to suggest that similarly, until and unless we, you here at Herne Hill, begin again and continue to function as a community, as a team, and a fellowship of believers caring for each other, then the purposes of the kingdom of God for us will not be fulfilled.

and your purpose in this community, in this part of Southeast London, may never be realized. Fellowship, freedom, and then thirdly, the requirement or the hallmark of a healthy church closely linked to these ideas before of freedom and fellowship is generosity.

It's not just about giving, it's generosity. I said this before, nobody told them to do this. Read the passages again. But when we read it, it says, they freely from time to time sold their houses or their possessions and gave to those who were in need.

[14 : 16] Please don't mishear me. Do not leave here saying that Dothar says we should go and sell our houses. That is not what I am saying. What we need to do is have a look at the heart and the spirit behind what they were doing.

Here we find further evidence of the unity of this church, their community spirit, demonstrated in their generosity, the way they sacrificed, the way they shared with one another.

When the Holy Spirit is at work, giving is a blessing, not a burden. What the believers did was voluntary. Acts 5, verse 4 says that and it was motivated by love.

You see, what you need to understand is that many of those believers who were there, they came to Jerusalem from far countries. They came because of the festival and the season that it was.

and some of them were hoping and praying that, you know, the people around them remembered that they should be hospitable, that they should provide for them, that they should be generous.

[15 : 34] They stepped out in faith. And here we have a group of people whose world have been turned upside down by the power of God, by coming to faith in Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon them.

and they gather together and what we discover was a willingness to go beyond the norm.

Can you imagine what it was like for them? What it is like for refugees fleeing war-torn zones, war-torn countries in our context?

You know, coming in from Ukraine, coming from Afghanistan or wherever, wondering whether they would be accepted, whether they would be fed, whether they would sleep. Can you imagine what it is like for some now that the price of gas is so high that they can't heat their homes?

And I thank God that you have warm space. But folks, somebody's got to pay for the heating. And what we see in this passage in Acts.

[16 : 52] By the way, nobody told me to say all of these things by the way, so just in case you're wondering. I have had no communication with anybody apart from Beatrice emailing me saying, I'm reading on Sunday.

Is there a passage you want me to read? And then I ignored her for about a week. And then on Friday, I think it was Friday, yeah, or Thursday, I sent an email saying, oh, by the way, this is the passage.

Bless her. She just went ahead. It's a good thing as well. Can you imagine folks wanting to come somewhere for fellowship, wondering where they could sleep, whether they'd be accepted, whether they would be fed?

We see in Acts 4 and 5 the spirit of giving and generosity voluntarily demonstrated and it gives us a glimpse that folks were aware of what the needs were and when they needed addressing and then they acted accordingly.

Some of the members, it says, from time to time, sold various pieces of property and donated to the common treasury. They were a community, in other words, in tune with the Holy Spirit so that the spirit of God would from time to time stir their hearts and say, we know that there is this need or that need or that need.

[18 : 18] Let's give a bit more than we normally would have done. Well, let's start giving because we haven't been. Please note, as I said earlier, it's the principle of giving that is being highlighted here.

The generosity of heart, not the practice of laying your money at the pastor's feet. It's the spirit of their giving that's important.

The sharing of possessions was a free and joyful response to God's overwhelming generosity in Christ Jesus. They were so overwhelmed by what Christ had done for them and in them and to them and through them that they thought nothing of giving of their possessions for others.

At the end of chapter 4, Barnabas was singled out for his generosity while Ananias and Sapphira were punished not because they did not give but because of their deceit.

somebody once said, we sometimes want to pretend to be what we are not. Which leads us to the fourth hallmark of a healthy church, the fear of God.

- [19 : 51] The Ananias and Sapphira story is a potent reminder of the awesome power of God. The Holy Spirit was so powerfully present in their midst that this actually posed a threat to their lives, to the lives of anyone acting hypocritically.

We were singing earlier and praying earlier, send your power. When the Holy Spirit comes with power, remember, he is the Holy Spirit.

Men and women today no longer fear God. We blatantly sin against him without any thought of repenting and living a holy life.

The fear of God that drove the disciples of old to live lives of honesty and integrity no longer seems relevant to our lives today. We can go to work, tell those little white lies, why do they call them little white lies?

I mean, seriously. Tell those little white lies without any sense of shame or guilt. We pretend that everything in our lives is honky-dory, everything is okay, and we never stop to deal with the real issues.

- [21 : 13] Sometimes we don't blatantly lie, but we say that we are being economical with the truth. Why, says Kay Arthur, is there no fear of God before our eyes?

We set ourselves as judges against each other rather than as mirrors for one another. Ananias and Sapphira were guilty not of holding back their money, but of deceit.

When you read the scripture, it says, wasn't it your land? You didn't have to sell it, but because everybody else was doing it, you wanted to show them that you could get in on it as well. And not just that, you then planned to lie, to say, this is the whole amount, yeah, everybody look at me, I'm giving everything here.

I'm giving all, I sold my land for this, and I'm giving it all to the church. Look at me. That's kind of what they did. Well, it's not kind of what they did, it is what they did.

deceit. You know, they could easily have come in and said, no, we sold the land for X amount, we decided to keep this amount and give you this, and that would have been fine.

- [22 : 38] Hard attitude. What were they trying to do? They tried to deceive their fellow believers into thinking that they were all of the same mind, into thinking that as you are open and honest with me, so am I with you.

They lied. Their lives were not integrated. They had one life in church, as it were, and another life at home, and probably even another at work.

No integrity. The land was theirs, as I said, to do with as they chose. They were pretending to be what they were not.

I wonder, Lord, what are we doing? What am I doing? Are we pretending to be generous of heart when we really just shuffle through the coins in our pocket to see what change we have to give?

Or are we saying, Lord, let me first give back to you in thanks for all that you have done? Folks, when we pray that God would manifest his presence among us, I wonder, do we really mean it?

- [24 : 02] As I said earlier, God is holy after all. We're inviting the Holy Spirit to come among us, and he does not abide that which is not holy.

I suggest that if we really want to see the power of God so demonstrated among us, typified by signs and wonders, then we had better clean up our own act.

I'm talking to myself here as well. I'm not just talking to you. The Holy Spirit is a comforter to the disturbed, but a disturber to the comfortable.

The hallmarks of a healthy church are there to be seen by everyone. The fellowship, the freedom, the generosity, and the fear of God.

Luke had many purposes in writing this book, The Acts of the Apostles, and with this I close. But he wanted to instruct them and us.

[25 : 07] He wanted to inform us and inspire us. One of the first things that Luke, both in this book and in Luke's gospel, would want us to do is pray.

Pray that these hallmarks of a healthy church may be evidenced in us and among us. Pray that her and her Baptist church may indeed be a people who are exemplified by fellowship, coming together, united in focus and intent, sharing our lives and possessions with others.

Exemplified by freedom, acting as a result of God's grace, freely, voluntarily, in love. Exemplified by generosity, in giving, so that the bills are paid, the kingdom is being built, those who are in need can be cared for, that none goes hungry and lacking, that HBC are exemplified and known as people, exemplified by the fear of God, that reverential sense of the holiness and the power of God.

demonstrated by the way we love one another out of a pure and generous heart.

Jesus said, they will know you are my disciples if you love one another. Fellowship, freedom, generosity, the fear of God.

[26 : 52] let us pray. Lord of the church, enable your people to be the church, a redeemed people, a holy people, a united people, a people who demonstrate generosity of heart and spirit, who demonstrate these hallmarks of a healthy church.

Fellowship, freedom, generosity, the fear of God, a missionary people. And in all things, Lord, help us to be a people gladly submissive to your truth as it comes to us by the power of your Holy Spirit and in Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen.